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FUTURE

ISSUE 373

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“THE GAME SURPRISED ME WITH THE NUANCE OF ITS APPROACH”



This being our second *Company of Heroes 3* cover, I knew roughly what to expect: our hands-on delves further into the depths of the explosive action, slick strategy, and cleverly crafted campaigns. But the game still surprised me, with the nuance of its approach to a brutal war.

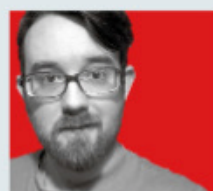
The North Africa campaign follows the armoured

companies of the German army – but also the life of a young Jewish survivor caught in their path. It's a lovely bit of subtlety in a game that could easily have been all bombast, and it demonstrates the passion Relic has for real history, not just guns and tanks.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team



FRASER BROWN
Twitter
@FraserIBrown

This month
He's been living and breathing *CoH 3* all month. There's a lot of dust in his lungs.



WES FENLON
Twitter
@wesleyfenlon

This month
One *Darktide* hands-on, and Wes is a Warhammer fan in the making. He knows what an Ogryn is!



HARRY SHEPHERD
Twitter
@HarryShepherd

This month
Sadly this is Harry's last issue – but, of course, he leaves us with one last excellent How To.



JACOB RIDLEY
Twitter
@RidleyJG

This month
Spent the month carrying cases around. Good for Buyer's Guide, bad for his back.

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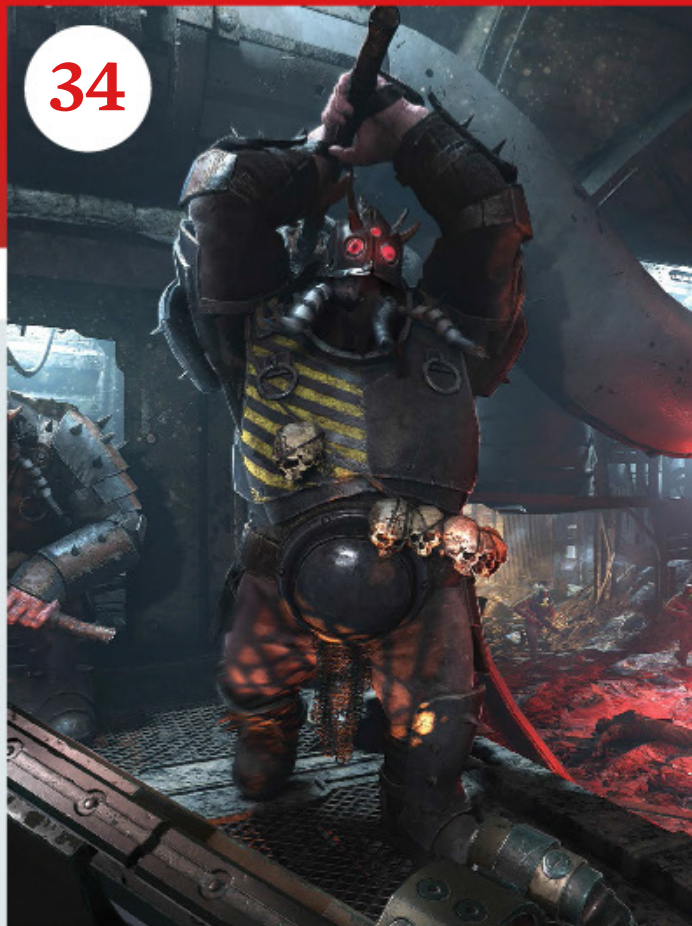
German tanks roll over desert dunes as we go hands-on with the North Africa campaign.

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Ripping and tearing through a Chaos-corrupted hive feels as good as we hoped.

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Slick, nostalgic brawler reviewed.

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Ever fancied creating a build that packs a lot of power into a small package? These miniature cases are here to help your adorably small dreams come true.

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The second part of our Diary series takes us on a quest to turn as many members of the party as possible into weird monsters, with... mixed results.

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Image credit: Artesian.

HARDWARE FAILURE

How a botched giveaway brought down a multi-million dollar **PC BUILDER**

Until recently Artesian Builds was a PC building company and, with 50 employees and multi-million dollar revenue, one of considerable size. As part of its business Artesian would livestream the building of high-end custom PCs, and do giveaways. One of these began a chain of events that, ultimately, would bring the company to bankruptcy.

Early this year Twitch affiliate streamer Kiapiaa entered and won an ‘ambassador’ giveaway run by Artesian. However, Artesian CEO

TOP: Artesian’s debts included \$450,000 to two PC components distributors, over \$200,000 in credit card debt, and a \$1.2 million secured family loan on the books.

Noah Katz said that Kiapiaa didn’t qualify because she had fewer than 5,000 followers across social media platforms, and withheld the prize.

Kiapiaa and the audience vehemently disagreed, and controversy swirled around the decision. Soon enough sponsor Intel stepped in, and an official apology

**ON MARCH 8
ARTESIAN FILED FOR
CHAPTER 11
BANKRUPTCY**

was made by Katz, accepting Kiapiaa was the “rightful winner” and adding, “I take full accountability and sincerely apologise.”

“My email back to them was a simple two sentence reply,” said Kiapiaa. “No ty. Take me off your ambassador list.”

This was bad publicity, but didn’t seem existential. That is until the story began gaining traction online, triggering a wave of outrage and requests for refunds from the company. This exposed that Artesian was not as well-run as it appeared.

The collapse was dramatic. On March 8 Artesian filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in California with over \$3

ONCE MORE

BREACH RETURNS



Just like Subset's previous game *FTL*, the tactics game *Into the Breach* is getting a massive *Advanced Edition* update with new mechs, pilots, enemies, weapons, an 'Unfair' difficulty, and more. The update will be out on July 19, and will be free for all players. *Into the Breach* is also (finally) coming to mobile. ■ AC

FARMTASTIC

STARDEW AIN'T DEAD

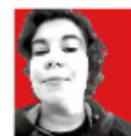


Despite Eric Barone working hard on *Haunted Chocolatier*, he's not forgotten about *Stardew Valley* just yet. He confirmed that a 1.6 update would be happening, but warned that it would be a smaller one geared towards modders. As for whether we'll see a 1.7 update? Barone says, "Who knows." ■ MT

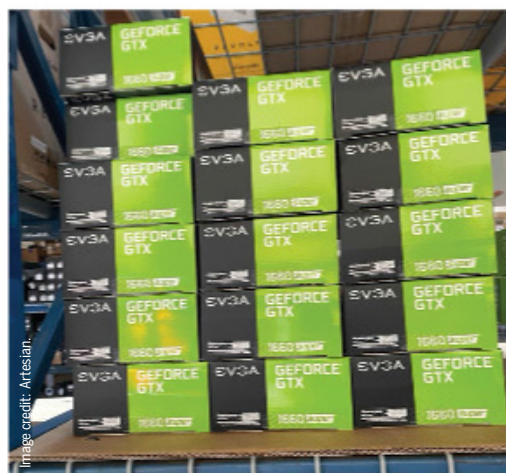


CERAMIC KEYCAPS

ME OLD CHINA



Cerakey is bringing something we didn't know we needed: ceramic keycaps. These thick beasts create a thocky typing experience, and even work with RGB. The reception has been immense; the Kickstarter netted the company around \$51,000 – a bit more than their \$6,000 goal. ■ KW



ABOVE: The controversy saw a bump in viewership for Kiapiia (who describes herself as "just your average 23 year old who likes to game") alongside an outpouring of community support.

million in liabilities on its balance sheet, including an estimated \$1.37 million in unfulfilled orders and assets totalling \$917,595. All of its employees lost their jobs. PC Gamer spoke to three ex-employees, who said Katz's long-term mismanagement had put Artesian in a precarious position to begin with, and he'd already been looking for new investors before the controversial livestream. Bankruptcy documents show a loss of \$1.6 million in the last financial year. "Hundreds" of PC orders will never ship, and there are many creditors owed money.

THE SELL-OFF

This June Artesian's assets were sold at auction, including 346 motherboards, 219 RAM kits, 413 cases, 283 coolers, 360 CPUs, 43 partially constructed PCs, and 59 graphics cards. Sadly the total raised has not been made public, and even worse customers will be at the bottom of the list for reimbursement as 'unsecured creditors'.

Artesian may well have been on its way out, but what's striking here is how online dynamics exposed the business's weakness and led to such a dramatic collapse. It was operating hand-to-mouth and, when a controversy erupted and triggered a wave of refunds, simply couldn't weather. And they say no publicity is bad publicity... ■ Jacob Ridley / Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Cheater's worth

Bungie won \$13.5 million in damages against two Canadian cheat companies.

Elden time

Elden Ring received probably its biggest improvement yet on PC: you can now quit straight to desktop.

Falling upwards

Fall Guys has moved to the Epic Games Store and gone free-to-play, as well as launching console ports.

Blade bummer

The *Enhanced Edition* of Westwood's 1997 *Blade Runner* adventure game is a real mess.

#SomeChanges

The upcoming re-release of *Wrath of the Lich King* is where Blizz has abandoned its #NoChanges slogan to make some significant tweaks.

Diablol

Diablo Immortal's success has been marred by heavy player criticism of its microtransactions.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Occasionally The Spy is commissioned for a spot of counter-intelligence – helping the PC Gamer team protect its special stockroom filled with boxes upon boxes of Rowntree's Randoms Juicers. Normally this is a pretty easy job. The Spy just writes, "Don't make your door code 0451, you clichéd fools," on a bit of paper, and pops an invoice in the post. This time, though, The Spy made a terrible discovery: it doesn't even matter if your door code isn't a tired PC gaming reference, the real risk is anyone knowing it in the first place.

It turns out that people are just going about their day saying *anything* to *anyone*. At any moment, a staff writer could just choose to tell someone that, actually, the Juicers are just a decoy. The real prize, they could reveal, is the box of Skittles Chewies tucked in the back corner, because the editor-in-chief physically can't function without them.

Everywhere you look, people are just saying things – an act that, apparently, is referred to as 'conversation'. For instance, Tony Hawk recently appeared on the Twitch stream of Andy 'andyTHPS' Gentile – a former Neversoft dev who also worked on the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 + 2* remake. Towards the end, Hawk casually mentions that remakes of both *Pro Skater 3* and *4* were planned, but fell through when remake developer Vicarious Visions was folded into Blizzard last year.

"That was the plan," said Hawk, "even up until the release date of [*Pro Skater 1* and *2*], we were going *3* and *4*. And then Vicarious got kind of absorbed and they were looking for other developers and then it was over."

According to Hawk, even with Vicarious being no more, Activision still wanted remakes of the sequels. "The truth is they were trying to find someone to do *3* and *4* but they just didn't really trust anyone the way they did Vicarious," he added. "So they took other pitches from other studios ... They didn't like anything they heard and that was it."

The fact that people are just out there talking is alarming enough, but it gets worse. It turns out that you can't always trust what they say. GamesBeat reporter Jeff Grubb, talking on his Giant Bomb news show Grubbsnax, claimed that only a skeleton crew was left working on *Battlefield 2042* following its poor reception from fans. "The idea is to move everyone to the next *Battlefield* as quick as possible," Grubb said. "It's abandon ship time."

THERE'S THE GRUBB

EA reached out to Grubb with a statement saying that his claims were "untrue". "There is a significant team across studios focused on evolving and improving the *Battlefield 2042* experience for our players," the publisher wrote.

So we have two competing, conflicting statements. Jeff, responding to EA's statement, wrote that, "My position for these things is consistent: if you hear two stories about what is happening, look for the space where both things are true." This feels very pointed, but also in itself isn't accurate. For example: if The Spy was to tell you that chickens laid eggs, and you were to tell The Spy that a

single, quantumly displaced ancestor to chickens had laid all eggs that do, have and will ever exist, and teleported them throughout time to locations that happened to be nearby regular chickens, the space between those two stories is nonsense. The Spy is just saying. Spy out. ■
The Spy

HAWK MENTIONS THAT REMAKES OF BOTH PRO SKATER 3 AND 4 WERE PLANNED



THE SPY
The Spy only talks to the hand-knitted plushies of notorious Soviet double-agents.

This month in... 2012



1 "Experimentally, I clang my knife against a metal pipe. A second later, the guard comes running down the corridor, passing through the field, and disintegrates into floating, glowing particles of dust. Wow." Tom Francis gets his hands on *Dishonored*, concluding that "I'm going to like this game a lot". Reader, he did.

ISSUE
243, September 2012
ON THE COVER
World of Warplanes
IN THE CINEMAS
The Dark Knight Rises



2 "*Dota 2* is complicated," opens our preview. If *League of Legends'* popularity wasn't sign enough, Valve's interest in MOBAs was a clear sign they were here to stay.

3 No weapons. No armour. No magic except illusions. Never directly hurt anyone or anything. These were the rules of Tom Francis' *Skyrim* diary, which started in this issue and ran for multiple months. "I create a High Elf, since they're good with magicks, and give her a good magician's name: Sarah the Implausible."



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



Masha watching the same person lose one million gil for the sixth week running.

VIVA LAS PHOENIX

Meet the erotic roleplayers making a living in **FINAL FANTASY XIV**'s mini Vegas

As I step inside the room of Jessica Tulipe – a towering Viera with mahogany hair and flopsy ears – I'm surprised how unassuming it is. It's decorated beautifully, with a bar and red plush seating, but it's not the room I expected from a pro dominatrix. Then secret bookcase doors swing open, revealing hidden furniture – lanterns sunk inside an ottoman, their handles poking up to look like restraints. Wooden slats form a smaller room in the corner.

"Oh, this is a cage," Jessica confirms. She sometimes leaves her clients there tied up. "You want them to think about you and you leave them with something at the end."

Jessica is the head of entertainment at Phoenix Nights, a casino/club in *Final Fantasy XIV* that offers companionship and NSFW packages with its entertainers, known as Kings and Queens. When Phoenix Nights owner Masha opened the casino in 2021, its goal was an RP experience with gambling games. It's grown into three storeys of activities: Eorzea's own diet Vegas.

WHAT HAPPENS IN EORZEA

The top floor is an RP nightclub, with DJs on Twitch and creative drinks that mixologists make with emotes. The bottom floor is Phoenix Night's moneymaker, with casino

fixture Blackjack and original creations like Apple Crash and Phoenixmon (a play on *Pokémon*). The High Roller Casino Classic is broadcast to every patron, creating an exciting atmosphere. As I lurk around the tables I slowly witness one player lose millions of gil.

Phoenix's erotic roleplay came after Masha noticed a "huge demand" in a post-pandemic landscape where many of us are a little more isolated and introverted than we used to be. "It wasn't really until I took Jessica onboard ... she's opened my eyes up a little bit more to the intimacy, the intricacies and the demand for it."

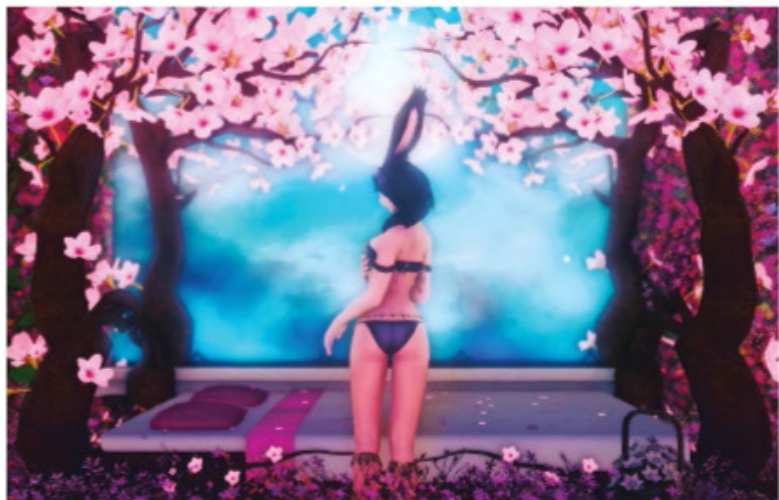
Jessica has been participating in RP and ERP for years, beginning in *World of Warcraft*. She hand-picked the venue's King and Queen companions. Shy Corpse is one of those Queens: a fellow bunny girl, tall and gothic. Her biography describes her as a switch, capable of flexing between dominant and submissive. It's reflected in her personal quarters: a room filled with shark tanks leads into flora and fauna, and a cherry blossom-embellished bed. A pond gently runs in the corner, with a stuffed shark mascot toy inside it. "I have a thing with sharks," she says.

Shy dabbled in forum RPing as a teen, slowly venturing into *Final Fantasy*'s roleplaying and erotic roleplaying. "When I started working here, Jess was like, 'Let's give you some educational sessions,'" Shy said. "I would sit in the room and be taking notes while she's domming a



Another life

ERP is just one small corner of a vibrant roleplaying community. There are tons of safe-for-work options too: bars, maid cafes, bakeries, restaurants, hotels, bathhouses, and even book clubs. Sites like Europe's Endless Nights or North America's FFXIV Venues compile events across data centres, making it easy to peruse through the ever-growing number of roleplaying venues and find your favourite.



FAR LEFT: Entertainers' private quarters let you live out your fantasies in gorgeously decorated themed rooms.

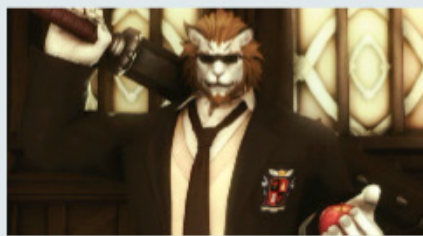
LEFT: Roleplay isn't just erotic. You can also lose all of your hard-earned gil gambling. Which I've never done. Nope.

PHOENIX KNIGHTS *More players who keep the wheels turning at the casino*



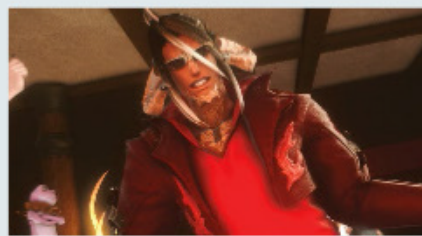
HOLO THE-WISE-WOLF

Game host and creator of Apple Crash, my favourite casino game that I definitely haven't lost millions of gil to.



ZELZZA ARLATHAN

Game host, security guy, and the most adorable hrothgar you'll ever meet. Manages to show up all over Eorzea.



DJ P4NTH3R

Resident DJ and manager of the casino's other disc jockeys. Loves fat basslines, beats and all things drum 'n' bass.



VEERA TWO

Mixologist for the casino. The most captivating experience you'll ever have ordering a drink, both IRL and in-game.

person and sometimes then asked me to join in so she could see how my level of ERP was. Then we could play on each other to actually set up a nice experience. So that was the most intense when we were together, interacting with both each other and the client."

It's clear both Shy and Jessica are passionate and professional, traits that clients pay 500,000 to 550,000 gil for, though that varies depending on the client or what they're looking for. It's damn good money, reflective of the intense and lengthy sessions. ERP is more than just typing words until horny sentences form – there's a lot of creativity and mental energy that goes into it, as well as being able to adapt to the person you're about to get virtually down with. For newcomers, Shy and Jessica may take things at a slower pace, being less descriptive and allowing more time between messages.

Sometimes they're thrown curveballs that they have to quickly handle. Shy tells me about one of her first dominatrix sessions. "They basically demanded me to eat their ass and I was really not into that," she says. She went ahead and complied, but "was so glad when they had to leave".

They also love their work. "There was one guy and he was kind of known as a troll," she recalls of one of her favourite experiences. "I hinted that I could peg him as a joke. But then one night, he actually came and he wanted to get pegged and after that – you know, he was the kind that always has capslock on – but he was always very quiet when I was in his presence ... he would just sit next to me whenever I was around. This was a guy that

literally runs around all the time, can't stand still in one place." There's never any shortage of players looking for a good time. As Jess bluntly put it to me, "This player base is very horny. Like, very horny."

ONLYFANS-TASY

Each Phoenix entertainer is appropriately vetted without being overly invasive to their personal lives, and there's a lot of trust amongst the staff. On the rare occasion things go awry and clients break fundamental rules, security is on-hand. Phoenix Nights also doesn't offer its services to players who are lalafells. Lore makes it clear that the tiny race are largely adults, but their stature and childlike appearance opens a gate to age-play waters that many refuse to wade through.

Players that spend their hard-earned gil know they're getting a safe and comfortable environment to

explore a niche corner of roleplaying, boundaries and consent at the forefront. Whether you're a hardcore crafter, raider, or casual AFKer, all three believe that erotic roleplaying is something everyone should try once.

"Set what boundaries you are comfortable with, because that's what you're going into. Whether you want to be this character in-game or you want it to represent more of who you are in real life," Masha says.

"Just start from yourself, the parts that you're most comfortable with sharing from yourself in your character," Shy adds. "Is it someone that you created, or is it more connected to who you are?" ■

Mollie Taylor

FOR NEWCOMERS, SHY AND JESSICA MAY TAKE THINGS AT A SLOWER PACE

1 month



TWO POINT CAMPUS

RELEASE August 9 | **DEVELOPER** Two Point Studios

Another Bullfrog-aping, light-hearted management sim from the creators of *Two Point Hospital*, this time putting you in charge of a surreal college, with classes including 'knight school'.



ROLLERDROME

RELEASE August 16 | **DEVELOPER** Roll7

From the creators of *OlliOlli* comes a high-octane third-person shooter on rollerskates, with a killer cel-shaded art style.

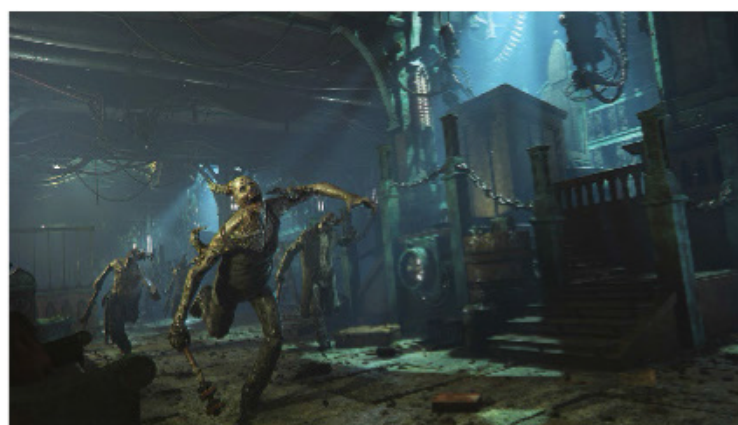


SAINTS ROW

RELEASE August 23 | **DEVELOPER** Volition

After recent entries escalated to alien invasions, virtual worlds, and a trip to actual Hell, this reboot is bringing things back down to earth with a new cast of trendy criminal hipsters.

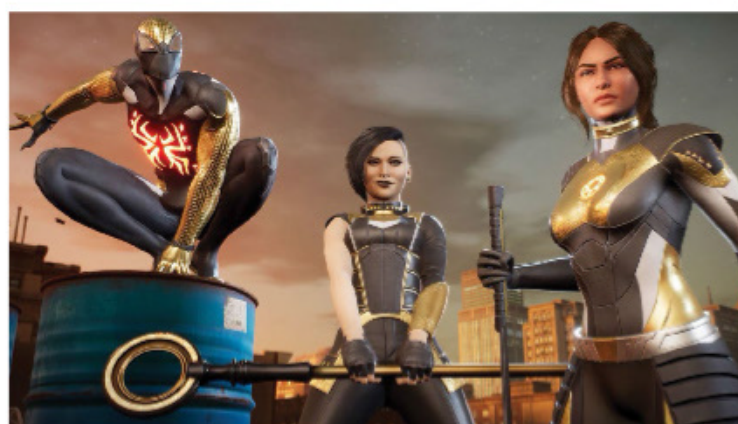
3 months



WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE

RELEASE September 13 | **DEVELOPER** Fatshark

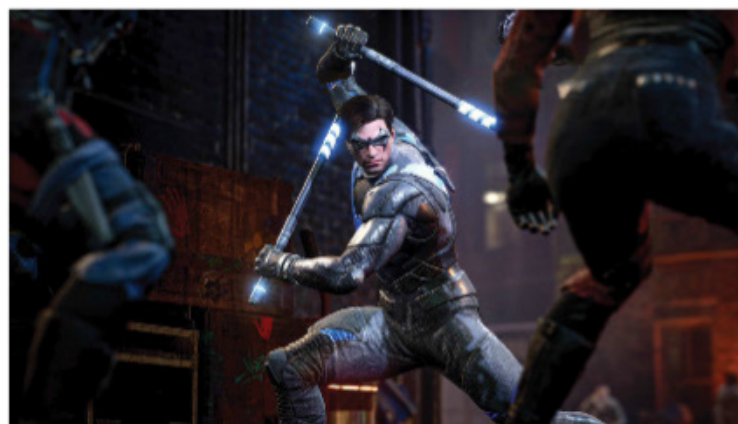
Battle through the grim darkness of the far future with three of your mates, and some very big guns, as a cult of a diseased Chaos god swarms to stop you.



MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

RELEASE October 7 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games

The creators of *XCOM* bring their turn-based strategy expertise to a superhero RPG with tactical battles, deck-building, and movie nights with Captain Marvel.



GOTHAM KNIGHTS

RELEASE October 25 | **DEVELOPER** Warner Bros Games Montreal

Batman is dead, and it's up to a team of his former sidekicks and allies to try and keep order across Gotham City in this co-op action-RPG successor to the *Arkham* series.

6 months



CLASH: ARTIFACTS OF CHAOS

RELEASE November | **DEVELOPER** ACE Team

A third-person brawler follow-up to the wonderfully bizarre *Zeno Clash* games, starring a mutant warrior fighting to protect a cute little furry... thing from harm.



PENTIMENT

RELEASE November | **DEVELOPER** Obsidian Entertainment

The director of *Fallout New Vegas* leads development on this surprise project: a joyfully weird historical adventure game inspired by medieval art.



THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

RELEASE December 2 | **DEVELOPER** Striking Distance Studios

Veterans of iconic horror game *Dead Space* are working on this spiritual successor, in which you have to try and escape a monster-infested prison on Jupiter's moon.

12 months+



STARFIELD

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

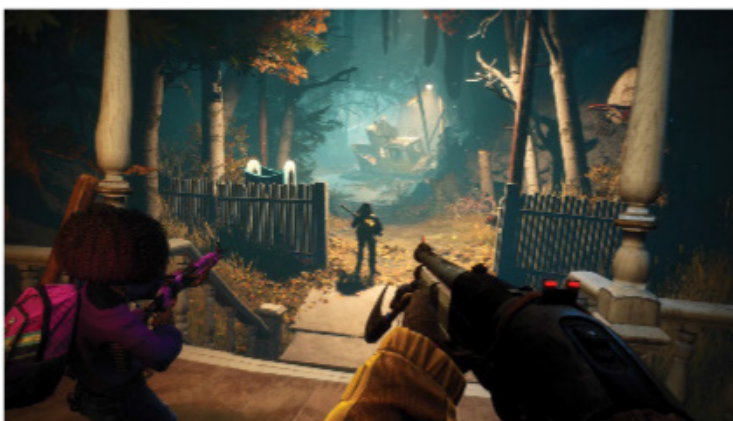
It sure has been a while since Bethesda last released a new single-player RPG – but if ‘*Skyrim* in space’ can pull off its grand ambitions, it’ll be worth the wait.



SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Rocksteady Studios

The long-awaited follow-up to the *Batman: Arkham* series, starring Harley Quinn and other super-villains forced to fight evil versions of Superman, The Flash, and more.



REDFALL

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Arkane Austin

The team behind *Prey* brings us a co-op, open world FPS about a team of vampire hunters, each with their own supernatural powers.

DELAYED

STALK HARD
STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl has been delayed to an unspecified date in 2023 – understandable considering it was being developed in Ukraine.





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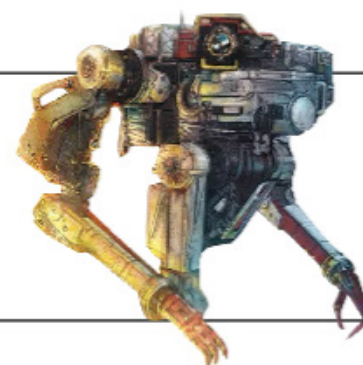
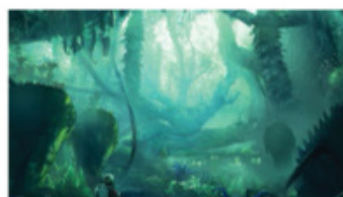
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PCSpecialist





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2023

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
bethesda.net

STARFIELD

No Man's Sky meets *Skyrim*, with a touch of *FreeSpace*

The first new IP created by Bethesda for 25 years, so they say, and more specifically described as “*Skyrim* in space” by its director Todd Howard, *Starfield* represents a lot of the hopes for the future of triple-A singleplayer PC gaming – perhaps even pointing the way for single-player RPGs.

This is, after all, the game we will still be talking about in 2032, following its enhanced re-release on the Xbox VR Xtreme console, and fully expect the next *Elder Scrolls* instalment to be described as “*Starfield* in, like, a mediaeval fantasy world. Can you imagine that?”

Following its delay – we’re not getting it until next year now – the game was all over this year’s Xbox and Bethesda Showcase event, letting us see everything from space combat to character creation to planetary exploration and a little of what ties it all together. “It’s hard to express,” said Howard, who looks more like Jon Bernthal every day and was wearing a futuristic brown PVC jacket and matching shoes that must have been murder under the stage lights, “how excited all of us are at Bethesda to be here with you today... we know you’ve waited a long time to finally see *Starfield*’. It’s certainly been a while since the game’s 2018 E3 announcement, but five years is nothing these days.

Let’s start with the gameplay footage, which claims to be in-engine. We’d believe that, too, given the amount of aliasing on view. Given Bethesda’s penchant for

squeezing every last drop out of a game engine that it can, a decision that saw Patrick Stewart reduced to an ambulatory potato in *Oblivion*, the Creation Engine 2’s ability to trace its family tree back to Gamebryo could be a cause for concern.

The footage and gameplay demonstration gives us cause for optimism, though, showing us spacesuit-clad figures walking on a planet’s surface, and revealing that the game is set in 2330. May 7, to be precise, but the grey barren planet it opens on is as far from springtime as it’s possible to get. It’s a moon, so hopefully the planet it orbits is more hospitable, but as it is, plumes of gas emerge from ridges of rock, and spaceships use rockets to slow their descent, throwing up clouds of dust that quickly dissipate in the thin atmosphere. A robot strides out onto the surface, and we discover that there is life on this moon – a plant known as a dust root. There’s what looks like grass too, and giant woodlice.

NO MAN’S LAND

There’s a distinct hint of *No Man’s Sky* to the creatures, and with 1,000 planets promised in *Starfield* that game may turn out to be an apt comparison.

There’s spaceship flying and construction, crafting, scanning and mining of resources, and the building of outposts too. Howard describes the game as an “epic role-playing game, where you get to be who you want and go where you want”, and a glimpse of the character creator, which Howard describes as “our most flexible yet”. Yes, the option to make hilarious roly-poly spacemen we’ve always wanted is finally here, and just how far we’ve come since *Oblivion* is keenly apparent.

Once again you choose a background that feeds into your starting skills, though astrology seems to have died out in the 24th century. Keeping track of all the constellations from 50 planets must be too much effort, or something. You pick traits too, and those revealed include having a mortgage and growing up as a member of a church. They have advantages and disadvantages just like the skills system, which once again sees skills improve as you use them, with levelling-up having a chance to unlock some useful new abilities.

THERE’S SPACESHIP FLYING, CRAFTING, SCANNING AND MINING OF RESOURCES

Starfield



» You're not alone out there though. That robot we spotted is VASCO, sworn to carry your burdens and possessed of what looks very much like a hidden gun in one of its arms. How VASCO goes about defending itself is unspecified, but the idea of building it up into a tank you can use to escape from space-giants is an attractive one. We wonder if we'll be able to trade him in for improved models, or whether he can be upgraded to become one of the best companions ever.

VASCO also appears to be in charge of repairs to your ship, and being able to take off from a planet any time you want instead of taking the space-silt strider or space-carriage on their limited routes would be a break from the *Elder Scrolls* tradition we'd be happy to see. Faster-than-light travel doesn't appear to be out of the question, as we spot enemy ships warping in as the demo character achieves orbit. Also, one of the images we were provided with after the event has the filename 'Grav Jump', which we're taking as a clue. The inclusion of this would make a lot of sense, as *Starfield's* setting puts us in a settled area extending 50 lightyears from our solar system, and we'd be surprised if we couldn't nose into the unsettled areas beyond too.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

The other games that are going to see a lot of comparison to *Starfield* are of course Bethesda's other great series *Fallout* and EA's *Mass Effect*. The game isn't set in the aftermath of a nuclear war, so can go in a slightly cleaner direction to *Fallout*, taking it naturally into *Mass Effect* territory where they keep their homes and bases tidy, and pick up the skeletons every now and then. The third-person shooting scenes we see once the demo character discovers a pirate-infested research base are extremely *Mass Effect*, with level numbers and health bars floating over the heads of your enemies.

The showcase demo was limited to this single planet, but it's not hard to imagine fending off waves of pirates from landing zones on just about every planet you explore – the equivalent of *Skyrim's* low-level fire mages holed up in towers who need to be cleared out. Also straight

out of *The Elder Scrolls* is the lockpicking minigame, which uses a limited number of digipicks to open a weapon case. Inside is a glowing gun called an Equinox, which looks very sci-fi compared to the space-shotgun (double-barrelled and reloaded by hand) the demo's protagonist has just used to dispatch some space pirates. The Equinox turns out to be another projectile weapon, and in fact the demo doesn't showcase any handheld energy weapons, nor a magic or psychic system to complement all the guns.

You'll go on to join a group called Constellation, the last remaining space explorers, which involves a trip to the capital city of New Atlantis. Veterans of the sparsely-populated Bethesda cities of old will immediately notice that there are a few more people wandering around, stopping in little groups to chat or just getting in your way. Making contact with Constellation opens the game up, with an artefact hunt that's likely to take you to the far corners of the map.

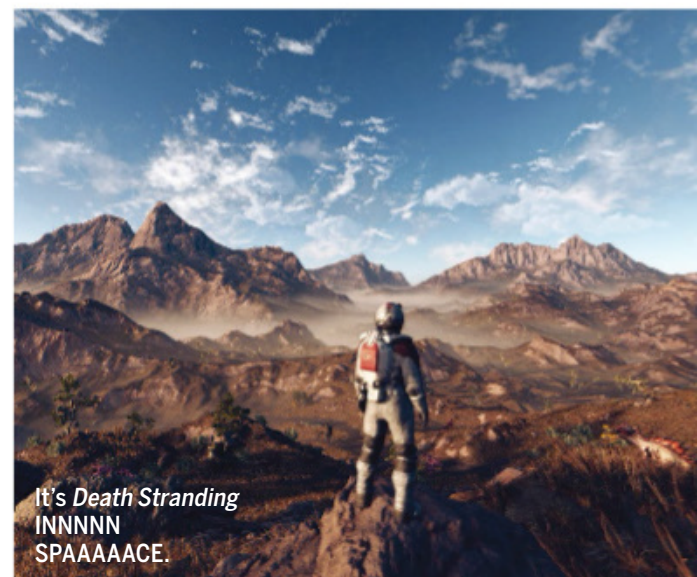
The gameplay footage then cuts between events, dropping massive hints at a faction system just like *Skyrim's*, including some 'peacekeepers' fond of uniforms and shooting the perceived bad guys, and a group called the Crimson Fleet who won't let you leave unless you're dead. Huge monsters rear up onto their hind legs, and lots of floating rings spin and twist in ways they probably shouldn't. There's even a tiny glimpse of what looks like low-gravity combat, which would make a great addition to the formula.

CLEAN LIVING

As it stands, with months of polishing time remaining, it's a good looking game, futuristic but not without patches of dirty metal, the blasting weapon strikes of ship combat producing clouds of metal debris, and the control computers just the right side of *Alien Isolation's*. This is a humanity at home in space, but it's not yet completely adapted to it.

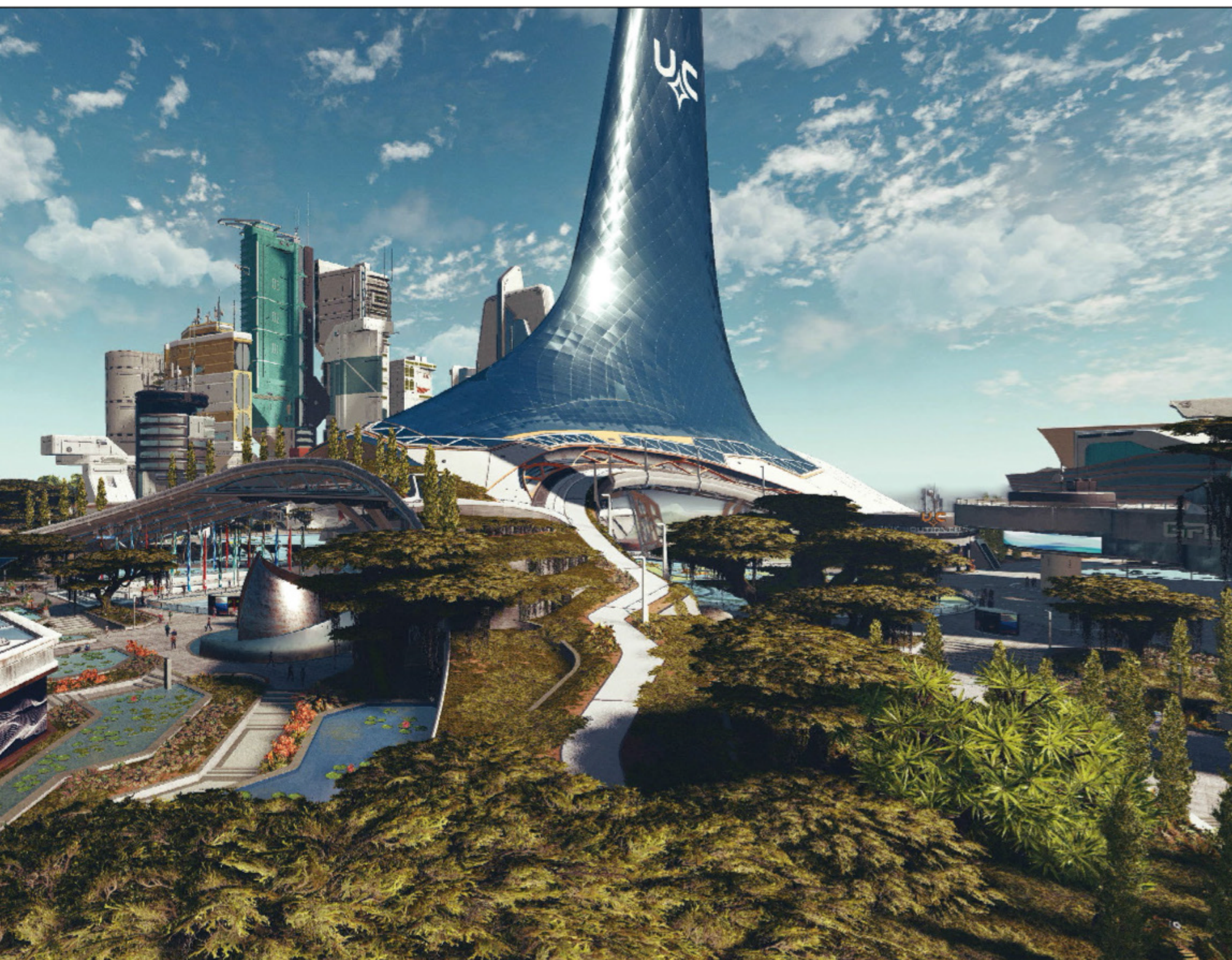
The whole thing is backed by a soaring orchestral score. While not as iconic as that of *Morrowind*, the combination of soaring strings and the depths of outer space is a classic one. Rather more silent is your protagonist, however – it's been confirmed that, unlike *Fallout 4*, we'll be back to playing an unvoiced hero in *Starfield*. It's a decision that speaks to a wider sense that Bethesda want you to make this journey your own, perhaps more so than ever before.

Ian Evenden



It's Death Stranding
INNNNN
SPAAAAACE.

THIS IS A HUMANITY AT HOME IN SPACE, BUT IT'S NOT YET COMPLETELY ADAPTED TO IT



ABOVE: New Atlantis! The Big Space Apple! Capital of somewhere-or-other and, with a name like that, hopefully not built beside the sea.

LEFT: Orbital combat is a satisfying blend of laser pulses and particle effects.



PREVIEW

Old Skies



ABOVE: Turns out you find PDA in every era.

RIGHT: He's just here to relive a nostalgic meal, honest.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Wadjet Eye Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
wadjeteyegames.com

OLD SKIES

I already feel like I've known these characters for eons

This upcoming time travel point-and-click adventure is the latest from genre king Dave Gilbert of Wadjet Eye Games, known for the excellent *Blackwell* series, and more recently urban fantasy *Unavowed*. *Old Skies* started life as a prototype in a game jam, but it's certainly grown a lot since then...

From the moment I drop into the demo of *Old Skies*, time agent Fia Quinn's personality is firmly established. She's confident, humorous with a sarcastic undertone, and suitably weary of the management at her time-hopping job. Despite her unconventional work, her tone is almost familiar to the player, like an old friend. That's always a good start for a point-and-click adventure. It helps that she has someone to talk to: her handler Nozzo, who adds narrative flavour as well as being someone she can check in with when you get stuck.

Across the game, Quinn is transported to several different time periods, primarily in order to keep some extraordinarily wealthy individuals out of trouble. Time travel is now a commodity for the rich, who can travel forward or back in time with supervision, and even pay to save the lives of friends or family members if their influence on history is small enough.

I begin my journey with Quinn in a New York construction site in the year 2024. Her client is a Dr Joe Anderson, a brilliant scientist who is responsible for medical tech advancing so far as to push

the average human life expectancy past the grand old age of 100.

The mission is simple enough: take Joe Anderson to a local diner for some food and then bring him back in one piece. Easy. Or it would be if Anderson didn't have an ulterior motive in mind, escaping out the back of the diner as soon as your back is turned.

DR QUINN

The demo for *Old Skies* surprises me in its depth. Within only an hour, I feel like I fully understand Quinn's personality, her relationship with her company and trusty colleague Nozzo, and ultimately what's at stake as a time agent. A mission that starts out as simply as a man reminiscing about his young adult appetite becomes a drawn out chase sequence, ending up on a rooftop with a delicate moral decision.

The game's already asking hard questions. Do you tell someone the truth even if it hurts, or leave them in blissful ignorance? Is it better to lie, or to let someone in their last moments know the truth? Neither will feel good for Quinn or yourself, but it's the sort of thing you have to confront when you're trying to protect the timeline.

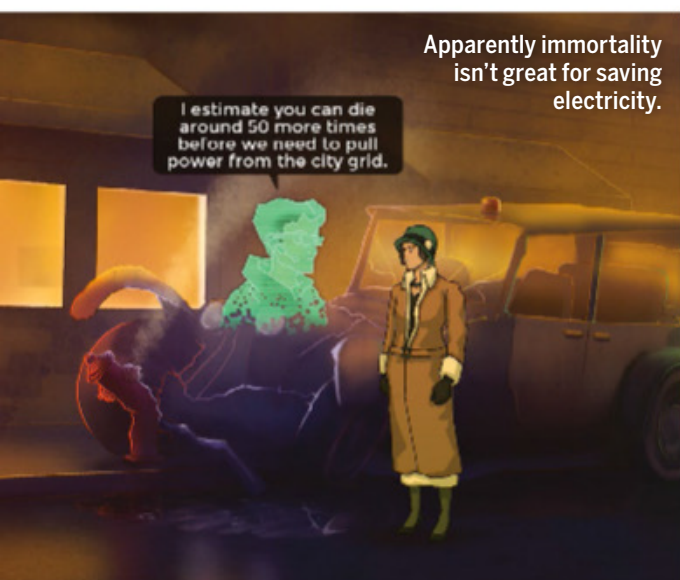
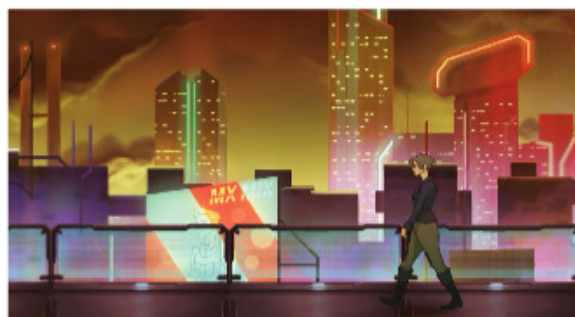
I've always enjoyed point-and-click games, because they often give you some of gaming's best puzzles and characters in combination. Although the demo of *Old Skies* has a few brain teasers to trial, I'm mostly impressed with the games' inhabitants. It exhibits expressive voice acting and writing that clearly show off the cast's personalities.

One young woman appears in just one scene of the demo but as a time traveller you know her fate. She's plucky and smart, but just a few years away from death. It hurts: you've known her for five minutes and you're already mourning her loss. But while she's there and talking to you, she's a joy to interact with. I found myself savouring those last moments.

Although *Old Skies* won't have massive branching narratives, it'll have certain key decisions. Quinn must protect the timeline no matter what. But I have a feeling she may be forced to break that rule, and delicious chaos will ensue. Without a time machine of my own, I guess I'll have to wait to find out...

Imogen Mellor

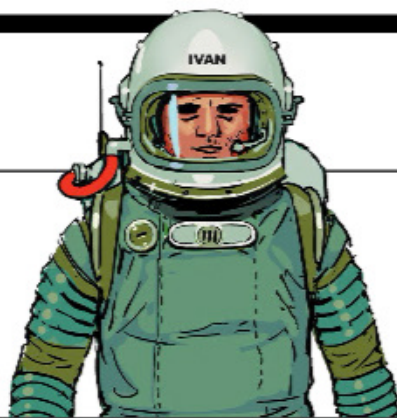
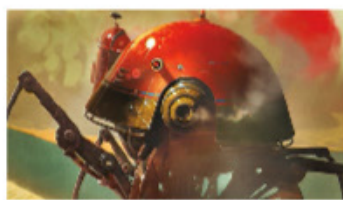
PLAYED IT



DO YOU TELL SOMEONE THE TRUTH EVEN IF IT HURTS, OR LEAVE THEM IN IGNORANCE?

PREVIEW

The Invincible



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2023

DEVELOPER
Starward Industries

PUBLISHER
11 Bit Studios

LINK
invinciblethegame.com

THE INVINCIBLE

Not so invincible on a planet full of killer robots

Polish sci-fi stunner *The Invincible* left a hell of a first impression when it was first announced back in 2020 – and that was just with a handful of screenshots. At last, we've finally had a proper look at the *Firewatch*-style adventure's rusted retro-future sci-fi world, and thankfully it doesn't disappoint.

Inspired by a novel of the same name by Polish author Stanisław Lem, developer Starward Industries' game follows roughly the same plot, taking us to the dusty canyons of unexplored planet Regis III after our vessel crash lands on its surface. It is a hostile, lifeless, wretched land – but the good news is that you don't need to face it alone.

After a short introduction, we're placed in the space-boots of Dr Yasna, who's sitting behind the wheel of a delightfully retro Eastern bloc space-car trudging along the planet's hostile surface. We're on the trail of a missing convoy, finding their vehicles crushed and abandoned in the rocks, and we've got Novik on the radio to help guide us through the who, what and where of the situation.

What plays out is strikingly reminiscent of indie hit *Firewatch*'s walkie-talkie conversations, using oddities in the environment to prompt conversations between Novik and Yasna as you explore the convoy's final resting stop. We climb through the husk of their space van to find the team's leftovers; first an animat (a robot with an anti-matter laser that blasts

tunnels into rock faces), then the remains of one of the crewmates themselves, as well as a robot helper still stuck in a programming loop.

It's a refreshingly quiet, considered take on science fiction, letting you really soak in the atmosphere and desolate sci-fi vibes. All these robots, ships, and loose tools have this great golden age aesthetic, even as they lay sleeping in the sand. Unfortunately, one of those rock-melting animats soon wakes up, making short work of the poor helper before turning its gaze on Yasna.

FORBIDDEN PLANET

"This story may take place millions of lightyears away from Earth, but the issues you'll face are not far from home," Starward Industries CEO Marek Markuszewski explains. "We think of ourselves as the prime species who conquered every piece of the biosphere. We lack humility toward the power of nature and evolution. The whole galaxy is our given right. Yet there are some places that don't belong to us. There are places that are not meant for us at all."

In a fun twist, Yasna gets to make one final dialogue choice before being completely vaporised by the robot – a sign that perhaps we won't be exploring Regis III from purely a single point of view. Stanisław Lem's original novel heavily centres on the concept of non-organic ecosystems, nanomachines, and swarm intelligence, which we see signs of briefly in the bizarre metallic flora that lines the walls of the canyon. But *The Invincible* also looks to explore the interpersonal conflicts between the stranded crew – even on this small scouting run there's a strong sense that tensions are fraying.

I do have a few concerns over the voice acting, which in the short snippet of revealed footage can come across as a little cardboard, underselling the drama. But *The Invincible* is serving up a world of retro extraterrestrial style, and the promise of a *Firewatch*-esque drama unfolding on a lonely rock full of secrets and desperate astronauts already has me on the hook. If Starward Industries can pull off its interstellar ambitions, we might be in for something really special indeed.

Nat Clayton



We'll use an assortment of chunky analogue instruments throughout the game.



WE'RE ON THE TRAIL OF A MISSING CONVOY, FINDING THEIR VEHICLES CRUSHED



ABOVE: There's a beautiful retro-future aesthetic to the machinery in the game.

LEFT: Robots have never looked better than the 'lightbulb in a suit of armour' look.

PREVIEW

The Alters



ABOVE: "Jan, this is Jan, Jan, and....Jan, was it?"

RIGHT: That's you, Jan Dolski. Or perhaps we should say, *youse*.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
11 Bit Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
altersthegame.com

THE ALTERS

Make friends with your alternate selves in this sci-fi adventure

Frostpunk developer 11 Bit Studios is swapped snow for space with its next game, *The Alters* – a “classic sci-fi” tale of survival among the stars. You play as Jan Dolski, a man who volunteers for a high-risk mission to find and extract a rare element called Rapidium that enables the creation of alternative versions of organic matter.

Of course, the mission goes wrong: the ship crashes, and Jan is the sole survivor. Alone and trapped on a hostile alien world, he’s forced to use Rapidium to create alternative versions of himself – the titular Alters – to survive and ultimately find his way home.

The Alters are not clones: each one is Jan at heart, but effectively a version of him that made different choices over the course of his life. Those choices led to different outcomes. Each Alter has a unique set of skills and traits, but also different attitudes, beliefs and personalities. They’re manufactured individuals, a dichotomy that’s at the heart of the game.

“We as people, we are shaping ourselves every single day with every single decision that we are making,” game director Tomasz Kisilewicz explains. “This process, the whole process of becoming who we are, it can be quite painful at times. But in our game, Jan, the main character, he has this unique possibility of not only shaping himself, but also reshaping himself, numerous times, with every single Alter that he is creating.”

THE ALTERS IS BUILT AROUND THE STUDIO’S “MEANINGFUL ENTERTAINMENT PHILOSOPHY”

Like previous 11 Bit games, *The Alters* is built around the studio’s “meaningful entertainment philosophy, so it’s a game we hope will make you think even after you stop playing”. It will feature elements of horror games, thrillers, and mysteries, and a “thick layer of surreality,” Kisilewicz says. “I mean, how surreal would it be to one day wake up next to a little different, alternative version of your very self?”

ALTERED STATE

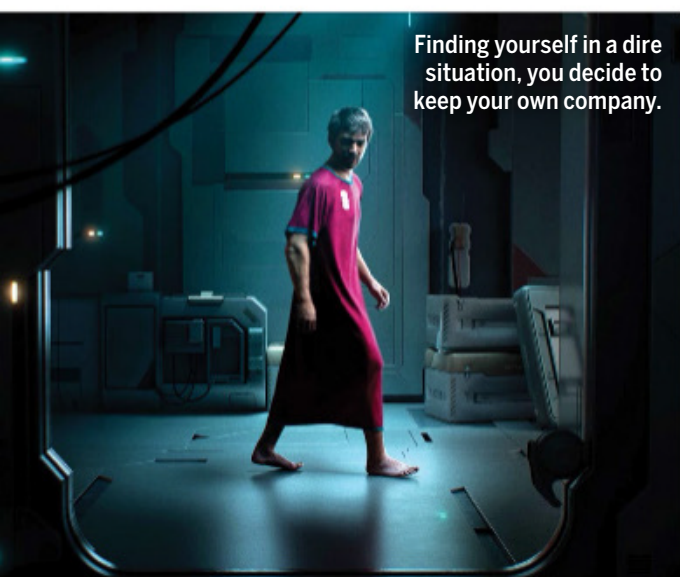
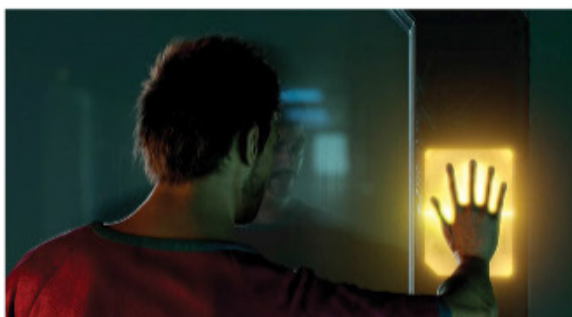
I know it’s not likely, given 11 Bit’s propensity for relentlessly grim experiences like *This War of Mine* (the horrors of war) and *Frostpunk* (the horrors of climate change), but I feel like there’s room for some real humour in *The Alters*, too. I am perhaps not the most well-read member of the PC Gamer staff, but the first thing that leapt to my mind when hearing about *The Alters* was the infamous Duplicator from Calvin and Hobbes, a device that enabled the lead character to create multiple copies of himself in order to lighten his load in life, which of course quickly led to chaos.

That may be a long shot, but what I do expect to see are some tricky ethical questions about sentience, humanity, and what it means to be alive. The Alters also bears echoes of Philip K Dick’s 1968 novel *Do*

Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, which formed the basis of the movie *Blade Runner*. And like the book and movie, the questions are stark: the Alters are Jan’s creation, but what does that mean for them as individuals? Are they individuals at all? Are they merely organic automatons, created to serve a purpose, or are they genuine people?

“It is very classic sci-fi in the way that we are taking a relatable topic, and we are using the sci-fi theme, we are using the sci-fi setting, to look at it through the magnifying glass and investigate it, take a closer look,” Kisilewicz said. “But then when we were choosing the tools, this is a very contemporary game, and we are taking advantage of what videogames are as a medium. So we’re using tools like systematic design and non-linearity in order to put the players in the middle of the experience, and in the end, allow them to create their own stories inside the game.”

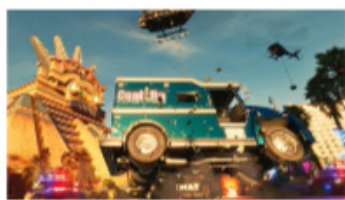
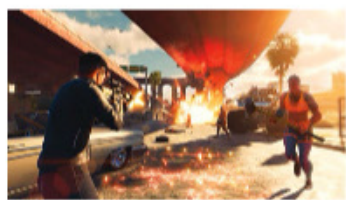
Andy Chalk



Finding yourself in a dire situation, you decide to keep your own company.

PREVIEW

Saints Row



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 23, 2022

DEVELOPER
Volition

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

LINK
saintsrow.com

SAINTS ROW

PLAYED
IT

Having criminals as best friends is more fun than it sounds

Saints Row made me nervous with its initial cheesy reveal. Reimagining a 2022 version of the tongue-in-cheek humour and utter chaos of the *Saints Row* games is not an easy task. But the demo I got my hands on this month convinced me that it's shaping up to be the right kind of nonsense.

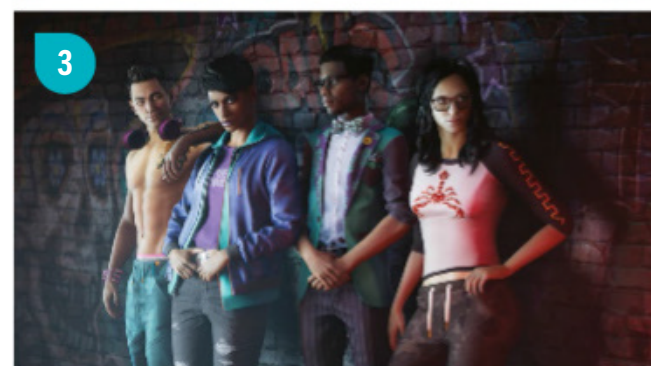
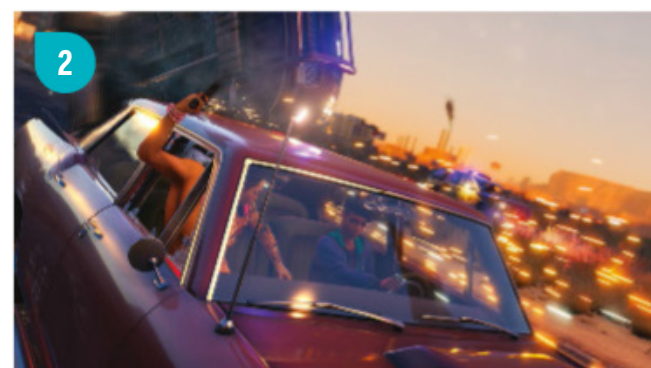
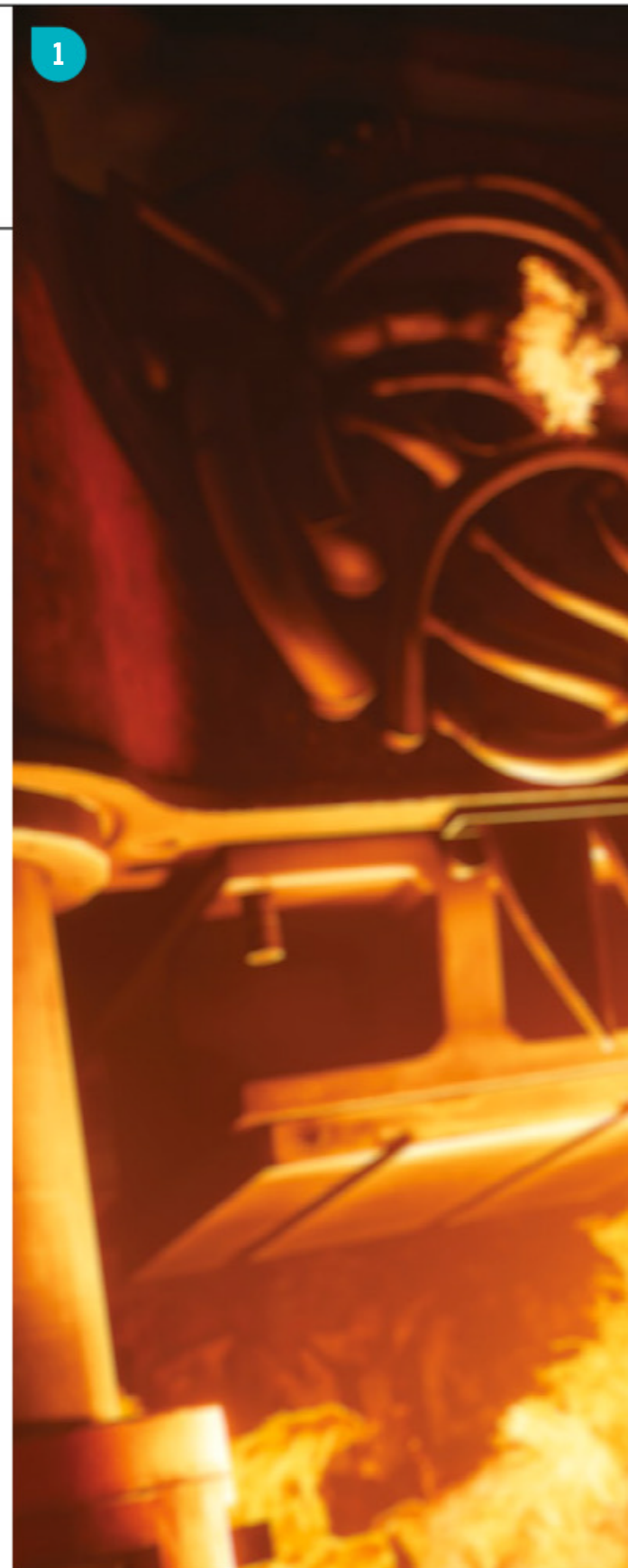
Physics? There to be played with. Character quips? Plentiful. And character creation? Transformative. Straight out of the gate, the game gives you a gun, a ridiculous setting, and tells you to hang onto a fighter jet while it tries to escape. It's completely off-the-wall, and that's exactly what it wants to be. The dialogue is cheesy, yes, but in a far better way than the trailers so far have suggested – there's a real charm to it in play, and the zoomer cast of characters are far more amusing than they are annoying.

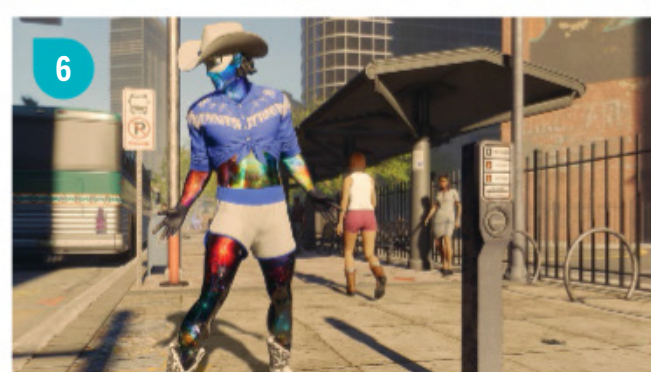
Unfortunately, I do have a big concern coming out of my hands-on, and it's *Saints Row*'s performance. Calling the several hour demo I played 'stuttery' would be a serious understatement. Full few second pauses in gameplay were present, as well as shorter stutters which did interrupt the flow. With the August release coming up fast, there doesn't seem to be a lot of time to fix these problems, even if this was a WIP build. But performance issues aside, the action and pace of *Saints Row* was thoroughly enjoyable. Lightly crass, terrible, yet lovable friends doing crimes to make rent.

Imogen Mellor

THE ZOOMER CAST OF CHARACTERS ARE MORE AMUSING THAN ANNOYING

- 1 The best driver in the fictional Santo Ileso, Neenah heralds from one of the gangs, Los Panteros, but leaves to join the Saints. She uses her pedal to the metal talents as a getaway driver. Though hardcore and strong, she'd do anything to help her friends, even if it scratches up her paintjob.
- 2 If anyone likes a good boogie it's Kevin. This party boy was formerly in The Idols gang, and lives his life from moment to moment in between fixing his hair. Incidentally, he's a pretty good cook, which is always handy.
- 3 Even violent gangs need a thinker on board, and that's where Eli comes in (he's the guy with the bowtie). While he doesn't have his gang mates' brawn, he's got the brains, and theoretically knows how to do their taxes. Not that I think you have taxes as a criminal organisation.
- 4 While not a gang like The Idols or Los Panteros, Marshall Defense Industries are a force to be reckoned with. It's a private army that will get the job done no matter the cost, whether that means men lost, money spent, or buildings demolished.
- 5 Cars are fun and functional. You can nick a car whenever you like, for crime sprees or just going to the shops, and many customisation options are available. See something you like in a new vehicle? Bring it to your mechanic and they'll store that knowledge for later.
- 6 Cars aren't the only things with customisation available. Players have already got their hands on *Saints Row*'s Boss Factory, or simply, the game's character creator. Voices, tattoos, prosthetics, and more are changeable. And hair options reflect a larger diversity of players.





PREVIEW

Street Fighter 6



ABOVE: New character Luke. He teaches MMA, and according to his bio likes “wacky T-shirts”.

RIGHT: Beloved characters have undergone redesigns. Check out Guile’s snazzy denim overalls.

FAR RIGHT: There might be huge changes, but Chun-Li’s Lightning Kick looks reassuringly familiar.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2023

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
streetfighter.com/6

STREET FIGHTER 6

With this stylish sequel, Capcom is finally ahead of the pack again

I have played *Street Fighter 6*, and it is good. It might even be incredible. Despite playing casually since the '90s, I don't have the expertise required to offer insight on the minutia. From what I've seen, though, this feels like the culmination of a vision Capcom has had for *Street Fighter* for over a decade.

I played with the classic six-button control setup, though *Street Fighter 6* is also introducing a new "modern" control option that maps multiple inputs onto the same controller face buttons. Capcom really wants to make this game approachable to people who've always found *Street Fighter* intimidating, but since it takes away some of the control granularity, it's not going to get in the way of competitive play.

This is still very much a complex fighting game for fighting game players, maybe even more so than *Street Fighter V*. A detailed comparison is better left to the pros, but while playing *Street Fighter 6* I was struck by just how much is going on with the new Drive meter.

Drive's most basic uses are classic *Street Fighter*: you spend meter to trigger special moves and charged up attacks. The Drive meter starts full – a welcome change that ups the intensity of fights compared to having to build up from zero – and you can also spend some to shrug off a kick to the face. The kicker is that if you empty the meter, you have to wait for every notch to refill before you can use it again, and you're left in a weakened state.

I WAS STRUCK BY JUST HOW MUCH IS GOING ON WITH THE NEW DRIVE METER

DRIVE SAFE

Several of the Drive uses feel like direct descendants of the Focus attacks in *Street Fighter IV*, creating gorgeous splashes of colourful ink around your character. It triggers the same "ooh, pretty lights" reaction I had as a kid when I'd land an Ultra in *Street Fighter Alpha* and the entire background would explode into an anime kaleidoscope.

With this game, Capcom clearly understands how much style matters. The most legendary fighting game moment of all time doesn't end with a boring, well-executed punch: it ends with a flurry of superhuman parries and the screen exploding in flashes of orange light. And everyone in the room loses their goddamn mind.

Capcom can't manufacture those moments, but I think it is building *Street Fighter 6* to look as exciting in motion as it can. The speed, the animation, the flashy ink Drive attacks – so many pieces of *Street Fighter 6* are effectively giant arrows and neon lights for a pop off.

Seemingly humbled from the years spent clawing *Street Fighter V* into better shape, Capcom has made a game that's meaningfully different from every other fighter out there. It has a whole open world story thing I didn't get to play, which looks weird and probably goofy but adds personality to the literal streets you're fighting on. As do the new character intros, where the fighters saunter out to promo music like they're in the WWE.

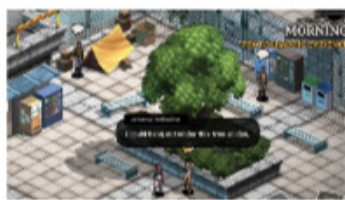
It's so silly, and maybe the second best idea any fighting game has had in a decade. The number one, I think, is *Street Fighter 6* baking in commentators that mimic the play-by-play of exciting tournaments. Maybe this is actually a terrible idea that everyone finds annoying, but at first blush I love it, as it mimics the real-world energy of tournament commentary, and introduces players to useful fighting game vernacular.

It's inevitable that some of the new stuff Capcom is trying in this game won't quite work out. But that's because it's trying so much, and that's incredibly refreshing. For the first time in a long time, Capcom and *Street Fighter* are poised to be the hottest shit on the block.

Wes Fenlon



Demonschool



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2023

DEVELOPER
Necrosoft Games

PUBLISHER
Ysbryd Games

LINK
demonsschool.com

DEMONSCHOOL

Hey, demonic creatures, leave those kids alone

This new tactics RPG combines familiar elements into something that looks completely new. The hook is that movement equals action – a new one on me when it comes to isometric turn-based combat. You select a character and choose a direction, and they'll interact with whatever's on that path, attacking enemies and buffing friendlies.

But a clever new combat system is just one of the elements *Demonschool* is bringing to the table. You begin the game as Faye, a new student at a 'university' for malcontents, and also heir to a famous lineage of demon hunters. You'll soon have four characters in your party, each with their own class and movement techniques. The combat system is streamlined and focused on combining your characters' moves to destroy foes more efficiently.

The visual style is a real treat: the majority of the action is isometric, but there are perspective shifts and camera tricks that see the world shift between 2D and 3D. Developer Necrosoft Games says the visual influences are "classic Italian horror films of the '60s and '70s, drenched in strange visuals and hellish grotesquery driven by a funky bassline".

The combat is one thing, but aside from that Faye's a student. If some of the character models give off *Persona* vibes that's not the only similarity, as you'll live through a school semester: choosing what to study, who your friends are, developing your team's skills through

class schedules, and acquiring new allies with side quests. You can "foster friendships or fiery romances between them all", with various different endings depending on the path you choose.

SCHOOL'S OUT

I spoke to Brandon Sheffield, creative director at Necrosoft Games, about the game's many inspirations. Turns out *Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor* on DS was a bigger influence than *Persona* (even if technically the same series), but that the visual similarities are more to do with the fact that "there are only so many ways you can make realistically proportioned human characters in this kind of isometric space. And of course with demons and relationship building it all gets a bit *Persona*-y. But really, it's more of a *Shin Megami Tensei* offshoot than anything".

Another of the names thrown into the mix is *Yakuza*, which Sheffield says is all to do with how Sega's series treats time. You always have a main objective but there's no time limit on it within the world, "Until then, you're free to do whatever sidequests you want, goof around with minigames, just wander, whatever," writes Sheffield. "We take that and simplify it, in that we have certain events that move time forward every day – the game takes place across a weekly schedule by the way – but you can freely do any other events that may come up, as you desire. It gives you a nice pacing and the ability to really play it at your leisure. My main thing in games is I want to be hanging out in a space, even if that space is weird and has demons in it."

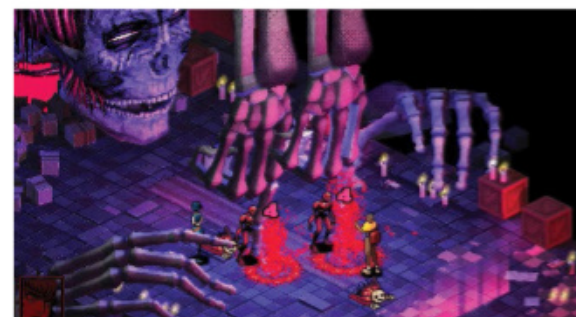
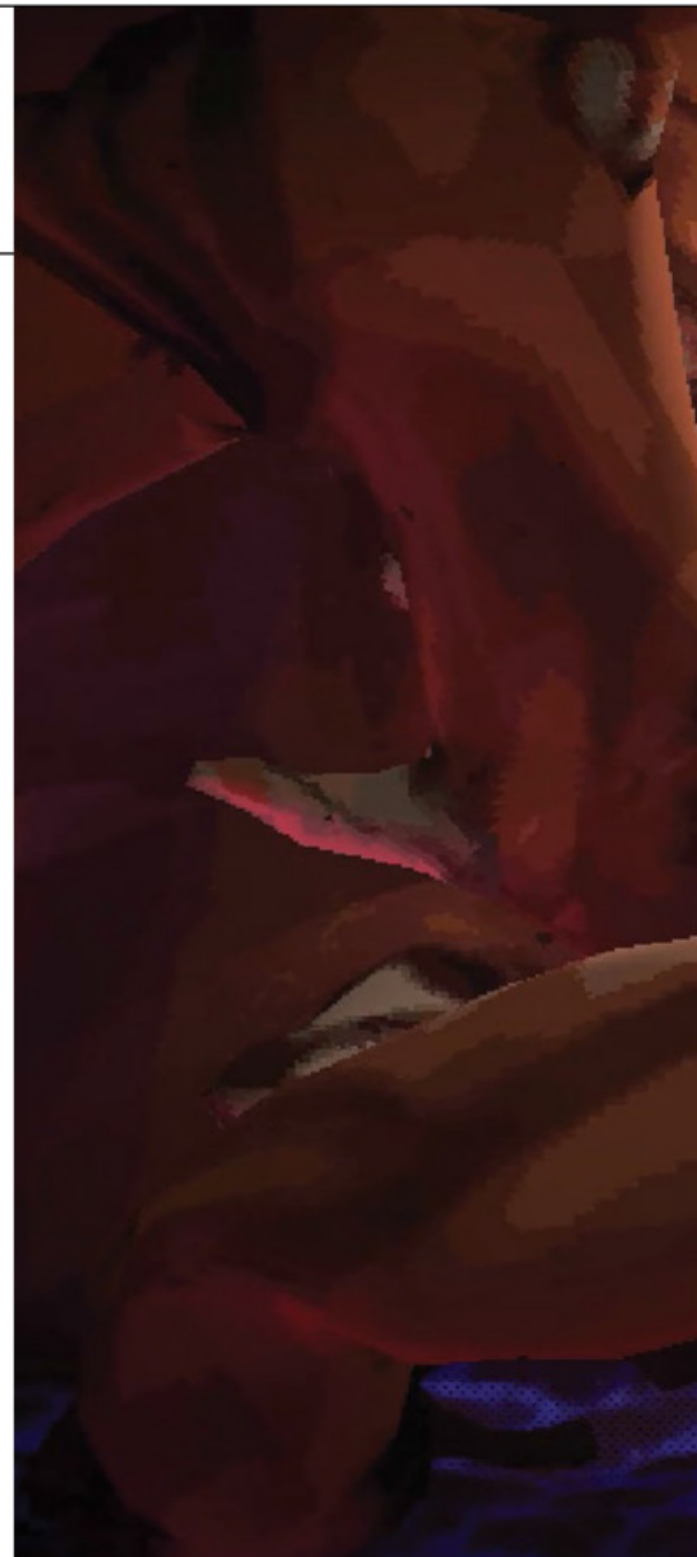
One of the aspects of the game that appeals to me is the otherworldly vibe. This place is vibrant but sinister, with the perspective shifts making it all feel that little touch more unreal. In *Demonschool* the human world is 2D, while the demons trying to pour into it are 3D.

"*Demonschool* is a different kind of place," explains Sheffield. "If you've ever seen Italian horror films from the '70s, they feel as though they take place beyond time, in another universe that's nearly identical to ours. I feel like that's what games are, they've got all these hints of the familiar, but they're ultimately fantastical."

Rich Stanton

FIRST LOOK

THE COMBAT SYSTEM IS FOCUSED ON COMBOING YOUR CHARACTERS' MOVES





ABOVE: Yeah, I'd run from this massive demon gob too.

LEFT: Make friends at university, while battling demons. Not sure which is harder.



FAYE

I'm pretty sure it's demonic possession.

PREVIEW

Warhammer 40,000: Darktide

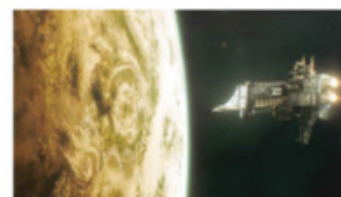
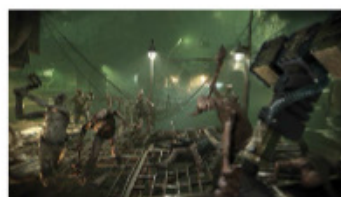


ABOVE: See: plenty of skulls. Some enemies even wear them as jewellery.

RIGHT: You can make weapon upgrades with crafting materials, then swap them between different weapons.



Warhammer 40,000: Darktide



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Sep 13

DEVELOPER
Fatshark

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
playdarktide.com

WARHAMMER 40K: DARKTIDE

A confident, carnage-filled step forward from *Vermintide*

My favourite thing in *Darktide* is the skull. OK, let me clarify – there's definitely more than one skull. But I was enamoured with one in particular: the skull decoder, a grinning cranium with spider-like legs used to interface with computers. There won't be a better interaction prompt this year than "Press E to prepare Skull Decoder".

"There's no hacking in 40K," says Fatshark head of design Victor Magnuson, who spent about two hours talking to me while we played through a few missions. Thankfully 40K does have skull decoding – or at least it does now. "Everything we do we check with Games Workshop. They check every asset, every voice line, everything. It's a back and forth. But especially since we've done *Vermintide*, they trust us."

There's an attention to detail in *Darktide* that exudes confidence, and a lavishness that *Vermintide* didn't have the time or budget for. There's the frankly enormous hordes of enemies that can now be on-screen at once thanks to a major engine rework. Then there's the secondary abilities on most weapons, like revving up a chainsword to saw through an enemy instead of slicing them open.

Most exciting to me is Fatshark's approach to making levels more variable and replayable without resorting to procedural generation.

"In general you can expect the same types of missions as in *Vermintide*," Magnuson says. "Something we changed

is how we build the missions. In *Vermintide* the mission and the level are tied together. Here we've separated them, which makes it possible for us to create a zone, and then put missions inside that zone. There will be multiple missions taking place in the same area, so you'll be passing through areas you've gone through in another mission. I think that's really cool, because it gives you a sense of place, 'Wait, haven't I been here before?'"

One element of *Vermintide* that has been substantially reworked is the loot system. You'll still get some random gear as in *Vermintide 2*, but you can also buy weapons from an in-game shop (with earned currency – only cosmetic stuff will be available for real cash), or set a 'contract' on a weapon you want and then earn it through a progression system.

CLASS ACTION

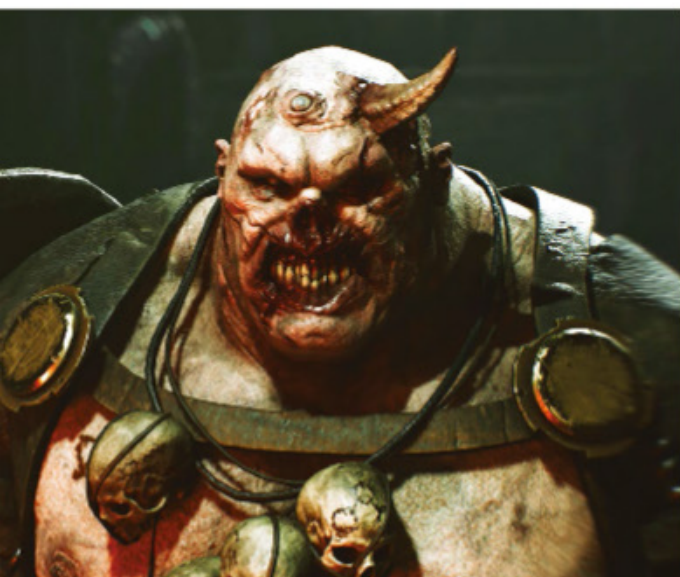
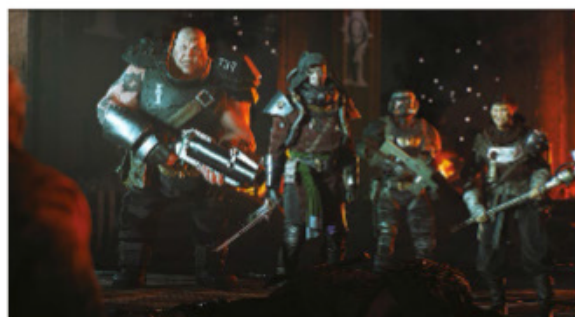
Trying out a couple of *Darktide*'s classes, I had the most fun with the Ogryn, a giant literally twice the size of the other characters. The Ogryn can charge forward and send piles of enemies flying like rag dolls, making him an excellent tank. But the real treat is his shotgun, which has a secondary fire mode that turns it into a semi-automatic shredding machine. Rushing hordes of mutants just explode into pulp.

There's still more melee combat in *Darktide* than I was expecting – Fatshark definitely didn't jettison what it did so well in *Vermintide*. But the guns? The guns feel good. I only got to sample a few, but they all feel like they belong in a proper shooter. Magnuson referenced aiming for a *Call of Duty*-level of gun feel, which is a high bar in terms of *smoothness*, but I think *Darktide*'s already spanking *CoD* on weapon design. Give me a rifle that spits out lasers over bullets any day.

There were a few rough spots in my preview – a couple crashes, some brain-dead teammate AI that is still on Fatshark's to-do list – but it's a game I would've happily played all day even in that state. I don't know yet how well the changes to loot and levelling will play out here, but the action is everything I wanted from a 40K version of *Vermintide*. It's an enormous galaxy, full of skulls that need some popping. Or, er, decoding.

Wes Fenlon

TRYING OUT DARKTIDE'S CLASSES, I HAD THE MOST FUN WITH THE OGRYN





REDFALL

NEW
INFO

Arkane combines its immersive sim legacy with shooter action

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2023

PUBLISHER
Bethesda

DEVELOPER
Arkane Austin

LINK
bethesda.net/en/game/redfall

It's really tempting fate to call your sleepy island town 'Redfall' – with a name like that, you can hardly be upset if a bunch of vampires take over and start splashing blood all over the place, can you? OK, maybe at the point where they've blocked out the sun, cut you off from the mainland, and forced everyone to join their ghoul cult, you could raise some concerns. But I still think you brought it on yourselves.

Luckily for the irresponsible residents of Redfall, help is here in the form of four adept vampire hunters – a young telekinetic, a seasoned cryptid hunter, a genius inventor, and a sniper with an undead eye. You can step into the shoes of any one of them for a solo adventure, or team up with friends for a full team of four.

It's hard to avoid *Left 4 Dead* comparisons – this is co-op first-person shooting in a town overrun by the undead, and there are even specific touchstones like bloated enemies that explode when

disturbed, alerting their mates to your position. But Arkane's immersive sim roots are clear, too. Armed cultists encourage you to consider stealth, and try alternate routes to your objective, and a range of powers among the characters allow for clever combos.

There's even a hint of *Dishonored's* strange otherworld, as a mysterious door in a level takes the heroes to a distorted realm of the collective unconscious to... well, fight more vampires, but with a weirder backdrop.

Launch is planned for the first half of 2023.

Robin Valentine

Join the conversation!

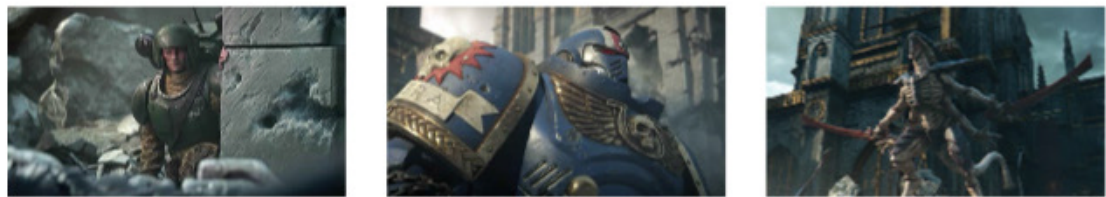


Discuss all things PC gaming with fellow
readers at our official forums

forums.pcgamer.com

PC GAMER

Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine 2



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Saber Interactive

PUBLISHER
Focus Entertainment

LINK
bit.ly/SpaceMarine2

WARHAMMER 40K: SPACE MARINE 2

Battle tyrannids by the thousands in this shooter sequel

Saying we were a bit excited when it was announced that, after a decade of waiting, *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine* was getting a sequel would be an understatement. Developed by Relic Entertainment and released in 2011, the original *Space Marine* was both an adrenaline-pumping action game and a wonderfully evocative depiction of the setting.

Naturally, we were eager to line up Saber Interactive, the studio behind *Space Marine 2*, for an interview. Tim Willits, Saber's chief creative officer, is a veteran developer with credits going back to id Software's heyday, having designed levels for *Ultimate Doom* and worked on games like *Hexen* and *Quake*. He brings the historical perspective: "I bet many people do not know that the original DoomGuy was actually a space marine inspired by an even older space marine, which is the Warhammer 40,000 space marine."

Where DoomGuy pretty much exclusively fights demons, Captain Titus spent the previous *Space Marine* game demolishing orks and the forces of Chaos. It looks like he'll be doing the same to swarms of alien tyrannids in its sequel. "In this particular game the tyrannids are the main focus," Saber's creative director Oliver Hollis-Leick tells us, "and what makes them compelling is that they are extragalactic locust-like creatures, they've come in from goodness knows where, they spread like wildfire, they devour everything in their path, and they leave

nothing in their wake. One of the great things about the tyrannids is they come in the thousands and our proprietary engine, the Saber Swarm Engine, can deliver these epic battles."

BUG HUNT

One of the main reasons Relic's *Space Marine* is still fondly remembered is its combat, which pushed back against the popular cover-shooter formula of the era with a system that rewarded you for closing on enemies like you'd just been given a motivational speech by Alec Baldwin. Its gory chainsword, power axe, and hammer executions were fun to watch, but also how you got your health back in the absence of hip-level walls to hide behind. What's *Space Marine 2* got in store for us there?

"The combat in *Space Marine 2* is a mix between melee combat, along with some really cool over-the-top weapons," says Willits. "We looked at the original *Space Marine* game where they had a lot of this 'push-forward combat', which has inspired many other videogames." Willits would know, having been studio director at id during the 2016 *Doom* reboot, which similarly rewarded players with finishers that handed out both health and ammo.

"That 'never-stop, never-take-cover combat' is integral to *Space Marine 2*," he goes on, "along with these cool, powerful weapons. You're either tearing up enemies in front of you, or you're blowing 'em away from the back of the battlefield. It's the best of both worlds."

It all goes back to the Warhammer tabletop games. During research for *Space Marine 2*, Hollis-Leick and Willits looked for inspiration at Games Workshop's Warhammer World museum, which exhibits hordes of miniatures.

"You find yourself crouching down and looking into the ranks of space marines that are facing tyrannids or orks or whatever," Hollis-Leick said, "and something Tim and I said at that moment was, 'We need to make *this* come alive. I don't want to look at this, I want to be *inside* this. I want to be gunning down tyrannids by the thousands.' And so seeing that actually happen and come alive has been thrilling."

Jody Macgregor

"THAT 'NEVER-STOP, NEVER-TAKE-COVER COMBAT' IS INTEGRAL TO SPACE MARINE 2"



You know, you have surprisingly clean teeth for an alien monster.



ABOVE: Captain Titus, hero of the original, returns for this sequel, minus voice actor Mark Strong.

LEFT: A true meeting of minds, here.

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Tom Sykes



FIRST
LOOK

FINAL FANTASY XVI

No PC date yet, but it hits PS5 next summer

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

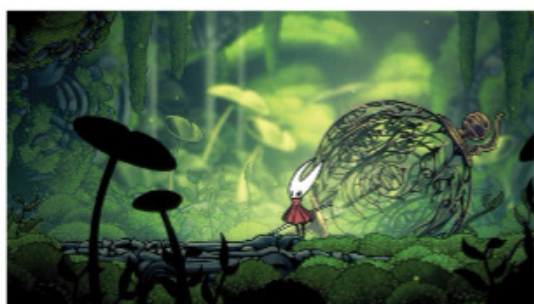
PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
na.finalfantasyxvi.com

If you were in any doubt that *Final Fantasy XVI* would feature summons, be reassured by the recent, action-heavy trailer. Your pals Ifrit and Shiva are

here, adding cinematic flair to a game that has finally shed all vestiges of turn-based combat. That might not be a bad thing, as combat director Ryota Suzuki previously worked on *Devil May Cry 5*. The

story's more mature than recent entries, and *not* set in an open world. That's so you can visit more of the globe as improbably named hero Clive, duffing up foes with the aid of an AI-controlled party.



Hollow Knight: Silksong

RELEASED TBC | DEVELOPER Team Cherry

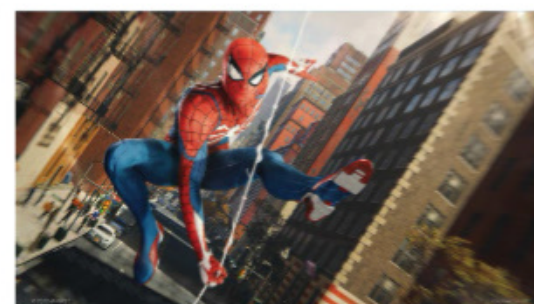
Hollow Knight fans have been subsisting on morsels of footage since *Silksong* was announced in, I think, the Mesozoic Era, but the latest reveal contained over a minute of new footage to gorge upon. The hardcore have already watched a four-hour breakdown on YouTube, but what I can tell you in 100 words is that all the stuff you loved in the original appears present and correct. That's gloomy subterranean platforming, stunning artwork and exciting insect fighting – the latter seems almost *Devil May Cry*-like thanks to more agile new protagonist Hornet.



The Last of Us

RELEASED TBC | DEVELOPER Naughty Dog

The Last of Us is the latest PlayStation exclusive to be given a PC port, although this isn't the 2013 original, but a remake Sony says will modernise the action and add more accessibility options. Naturally, it will look a whole lot fancier too, given that it's a major first-party release for the PS5 this September. The original's motion capture performances have been preserved, oddly enough, but the character models are substantially reworked, as are the post-apocalyptic environments around them. Though there's no date yet, it's great to see Sony's PC library filling out.



Spider-Man Remastered

RELEASED August 12 | DEVELOPER Nixxes Software

After being tangled up with Sony for *Marvel's Spider-Man* and its sequel, *Miles Morales*, the web-slinger is making a leap onto PC. The surprising bit is that it's happening really bloody soon: *Spider-Man Remastered* will be with us on August 12, while *Spider-Man: Miles Morales* is not far behind it, releasing in autumn this year. Both were well-received on PlayStation, and that was without the "ray-traced reflections" that have been added for the PC version. It's just a shame Spider-Man will plummet to his death while we're distracted by the ray-traced reflections in skyscrapers.



Minecraft Legends

RELEASED 2023 | DEVELOPER Mojang, Blackbird Interactive

It's more than a little surprising that the developer behind *Hardspace: Shipbreaker* is co-creating a *Minecraft* game, but Blackbird's storied RTS history means this is worth keeping an eye on, even if words like Nether and piglins mean nothing to you. The former is some nasty corruption and the latter are the monsters spreading it in this action RTS, which has you building bases and leading forces including skeletons and creepers into the fray. There's multiplayer, of course: competitive and co-op. Not sure how this exists, but it has potential.



COD: Modern Warfare 2

RELEASED October 28 | DEVELOPER Infinity Ward

Activision's shiny reboot of the *Modern Warfare* series continues with *Modern Warfare 2*, which revisits the saga of Soap, Captain Price and all the other lads from Task Force 141, who may be more alive than you remember if you played that *other MW2* back in 2009. The big reveal trailer could have been more interesting, making no mention of multiplayer and featuring *another* oil rig infiltration level – though *CoD*'s gun handling, AI, and Gunsmith have been revamped. And it's going to be available on Steam, many years after the series first jumped ship to Battle.net.



Pentiment

RELEASED November | DEVELOPER Obsidian

A smaller project from Obsidian – and in particular Josh Sawyer, the director of *Fallout: New Vegas* – *Pentiment* looks *fascinating*. It's a historical mystery set in early 16th century Bavaria, with a narrative focus and lots of choices to make with “lasting consequences”, as you unravel a series of murders, and a big old conspiracy, over a 25-year period. You play as a manuscript illustrator, and appropriately *Pentiment* looks like an illuminated manuscript vividly brought to life. You can almost picture the monks in the background hunched over their easels.

RESIDENT EVIL 4

Got somethin' that might interest ya

You've played the original, the HD remaster, and (probably) the recent fan mod – are you ready for Leon S Kennedy to receive yet another facelift? To be fair, this is a proper remake of one of the series' most beloved entries, and the thought of returning to its village, castle, and island facility with modern technology is an appealing one – the revealed footage certainly looks beautiful. *Resident Evil 2* was a great remake, and *4* seems like it's being made in the same spirit, with a modernised over-the-shoulder perspective.



RELEASE
March 24, 2023

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
residentevil.com/re4

FIRST
LOOK

SAVERS DES

OM FORT E R T

COMPANY OF HEROES 3's second campaign is all explosive RTS action, all the time.

By Fraser Brown

W

hen I was small, my dad took me with him on a trip across the desert outside of Dubai, where we lived, to scout the route drivers would be taking in an upcoming rally. After a day of bouncing around in a 4x4, I was tired and bruised, but I came away with a newfound appreciation of the golden expanse – for its big, open spaces that really lets vehicles rip; for its hidden dangers that can halt drivers in their tracks; and for the surprising diversity and sudden, dramatic changes in terrain.

These qualities, which gave me such a memorable experience when I was 12, also make the desert a compelling setting for an RTS, which is evident in *Company of Heroes 3*. The latest in Relic's World War II series of games, which was revealed last year alongside its dynamic Italian campaign, will also launch with a second campaign in North Africa.

Company of Heroes 3's North African operation is a return to the more familiar campaigns of its predecessors, with a more straightforward chain of missions and no turn-based portions. It's all

about those explosive RTS brawls. "In the Italian dynamic campaign, what we're doing is allowing players to forge their own story and their own path," senior mission designer David Milne explains. "It's an open campaign map where players are able to choose what missions and in what order they do them. The North African operation is a linear story. So the players are going to go through and play each mission one after the other and experience that whole story start to finish as we tell it to them."

WAR COUNCIL

The impetus for taking this approach came from the players. While most people got their hands on the first alpha slice last year, Relic's been working with its community council – made up of players, modders and map designers – since before the studio had even settled on a setting. So they've been involved in a lot of major decisions, and it was their feedback and desire for a campaign that puts you in the action straight away that led to the creation, in part, of the North African operation.

This is Relic's bread and butter, but designing this campaign has not been without its challenges, especially when you consider who

ROLL CALL

A few of the units you'll be fielding



FAMO RECOVERY HALF-TRACK

All DAK infantry can repair vehicles slowly, but for quick repairs you'll want a recovery half-track. It can even repair completely wrecked vehicles, regardless of what faction they belong to, making it an immensely powerful unit.



PANZER III

The Panzer III medium tank is a punchy, speedy warmachine, and still big enough to let troops use it as a transport. It's a solid tank, and you can upgrade it with a heavy machine gun to give it anti-air and anti-infantry capabilities.



GUASTATORI

Vehicles might be the main attraction, but these Italian engineers are a handy addition to the DAK. They can be equipped with flamethrowers or submachine guns, and are great at storming entrenched enemies and clearing them out.

MAIN: Even the roofs are deadly.

we'll be playing as: the Deutsche Afrika Korps.

This heavily-mechanised German army has been oft-requested, says Relic, and are distinct from the Wehrmacht forces fighting in Europe. The Axis had been pushed back by the British in North Africa, but when the campaign begins the tables have turned and Rommel has put the DAK on the offensive. Indeed, the first mission sees them chasing down retreating Brits.

“ULTIMATELY, SELEMA’S STORY IS A STORY OF SURVIVAL, AND A STORY OF RESISTANCE”

Although we’re playing as the Germans, Relic has been careful to not try and paint them as sympathetic – they’re still Nazis. This is a foreign power terrorising people who have been dragged into a war they want nothing to do with. They are, in movie parlance, the ‘bad guys’, and thus not a group you’re going to be rooting for.

“It’s a difficult line to ride,” explains narrative and audio producer Ryan Bourret. “We don’t want to glorify or make Rommel a hero here in any kind of way, even though you will be playing from the German perspective.”

REBEL REBEL

So while we’ll be following the advance of the DAK, the narrative also follows Selema, a 17-year-old Jewish Berber girl, showing us the impact that the conflict between the Axis and Allies had on the people living in North Africa. Relic’s used regional voice actors, cultural consultants, and historical accounts to craft both its battles and the narrative running through them, so while it’s fun to watch tanks duke it

out, the studio is hoping it will still come across as respectful, giving a voice to more than just the invaders.

“Ultimately, Selema’s story is a story of survival, and a story of resistance,” Bourret adds. “And it’s a common story. It’s a story that pops up whenever war happens. It’s what the people usually end up having to

BELOW: Erect a medical tent and give your troops some R&R.

do. A story of rebellion. We’re going to experience what Selema herself, a 17-year-old girl, has to do, what she feels she has to do, in this time. And it’s inspired by true events. We talked with a lot of people and heard the real stories and felt that this was something that should be told. That people should be more aware of. And



» that's the power of what games can do. You can be educated in a lot of different ways, find entertainment in a lot of different ways, and come away with some knowledge and some idea of what really happened."

Following the DAK's fight across North Africa we'll be visiting a bunch of big historical battles, from Ajdabiya to El Alamein. "These were really important victories for the DAK," says Milne. "The way that we approached them was really by doing a bunch of research. We're reading accounts that we can find, we're watching documentaries, we're reading books, we're, in some cases, in the case of Tobruk, going to Google Earth, because you can still see some of the trench lines in satellite photos. Just finding absolutely as much reference as we can to really inform what we're doing. We then take all of that information and try to boil it down to a few key points that we can make into objectives that capture the feeling of what the DAK was doing in these battles."

The aforementioned first mission doesn't mess around. Within seconds I was trying to use smoke to

hide from British tanks before getting stuck into an intense ongoing battle. I had tanks of my own, but I still needed to be sneaky, as the Brits were ready for me. As well as teaching the importance of obscuring the enemy's line of sight, the mission rapidly introduces some new tricks, as well, including tank riding and towing.

TRANSPORT TYCOON

With the tank-riding mechanic, tanks can serve as makeshift troop transports, with soldiers hitching a ride on top of the big, metal warmachines. This allows you to keep your forces together and moving at the same pace even when you've not got access to dedicated vehicles. Towing, meanwhile, lets you hitch big guns to vehicles, allowing you to bring them with you as you move to a new part of the battlefield – if they don't get blown up first.

Not everything that gets turned into a smouldering husk is gone for good, mind. The highlight of my fight across the desert was undoubtedly the repair vehicle, and I took advantage of its very specific skills

frequently. As you may have guessed, it's used to fix up busted vehicles, which naturally makes it a bit of an MVP. Not only can it repair damage, it can effectively resurrect vehicles that have been taken out of commission. But its real trick, the thing that makes it properly special, is its ability to repair *enemy* vehicles, making them work for your side.

What a power trip. It's the ultimate 'up yours' to the opposition, stealing their tanks and then using them to destroy yet more tanks. As well as being a wonderful insult, it lets you shore up gaps in your own roster, giving you access to toys you wouldn't normally be able to field. This is balanced out, however, by the resource cost, and it could also leave you in a vulnerable position if the enemy catches you mid-repair.

It's not a practical benefit, but repairing a vehicle also gives it a nice clean. All that dust and sand and battle damage can be wiped away, leaving you with something that looks brand spanking new. And you'll definitely want your vehicles to look their best, as Relic's put a great deal of work making them look incredible.

MAIN: Nothing beats a big tank battle – and this campaign promises to have a lot.

BOTTOM RIGHT: The Brits and their Commonwealth allies serve as your opponents this time.

IT CAN EFFECTIVELY RESURRECT
VEHICLES THAT HAVE BEEN TAKEN
OUT OF COMMISSION

If you've got a tank fetish, you're going to be in good hands.

That said, there's also something quite appealing about trundling along with your smashed up tanks.

Company of Heroes has always revelled in destruction, blowing up everything and making it look good. And that continues to be the case in North Africa.

DEMOLITION DERBY

"With the North African operation, we're bringing all of the elements of traditional *Company of Heroes* destruction into that theatre," says group technical director Ian Thompson, "so we can see elements of deformation of terrain, the buildings being destroyed, and while those buildings are being destroyed soldiers are still trying to find combat slots to fire from... destructible buildings, destructible foliage, all those things combine together with the vehicles and units moving around for a more enriched destruction environment."

Even in this initial mission, and even with the Brits ostensibly on the retreat, there are plenty of

BOOT CAMP *Tips for desert warfare*



HIDE IN SMOKE

There's a lot less cover in the desert, so you'll really need to rely on smoke to obscure the enemy's line of sight. You'll only start with a couple of infantry squads, so take good care of them.



STAY MOBILE

With fleeting cover and open spaces, you need to keep moving. Stick men on tanks, hook up guns to vehicles, and keep pushing forwards. But make sure you don't leave any enemies behind you.



STEAL TANKS

When you blow up a British tank, don't leave it to smoulder. Steal it! Just remember to protect your vulnerable repair vehicle. You'll want all the tanks you can field for the final fight.



WATCH OUT FOR LANDMINES

The Brits might be retreating, but they've left plenty of mines behind. You can try to go around them, but if you have engineers you can remove them and create a safe route.



RIGHT: Sometimes your armour needs armour.



HISTORY HOMEWORK

Swot up on some historical battles



AJDABIYA

This historically important town changed hands a lot during the war. Allied forces took it from the Italians in '41, and we'll encounter it as the DAK tries to reclaim it the same year (before losing it to the Allies again in '42).



GAZALA

Considered Rommel's biggest victory, the Battle of Gazala saw the Brits lose 300 tanks in a single day of the conflict. After this, Axis forces attacked in the middle of a sandstorm, and a day later the Allies began their retreat.



EL ALAMEIN

The Axis plan to occupy Egypt and take the Suez Canal was halted here, first with a stalemate, and then thanks to an Allied victory in the Second Battle of El Alamein. This was the beginning of the end for the Axis in North Africa.

» opportunities to lose everything. Moving past a derelict train, feeling inadvisably confident, I was quickly punished by infantry hiding in the carriages behind me, immediately followed by a tank assault. It was a dastardly trap. I just about survived the ambush, though, and continued pushing forwards.

"We've really done a lot of work with the AI to make it [better at reacting to the enemy]," says Thompson. "In traditional *Company of Heroes* development, ones I've experienced in the past, AI was something we did last. We would build the multiplayer game, then we'd build the AI, but we knew we needed to build it much earlier this time, so we've been able to have much more experience with the AI and so it's a much more robust player of the game."

After a few more tense battles I finally reached the town where I'd have my final confrontation with the



THE NORTH AFRICAN MAPS ARE IN PART DEFINED BY THEIR SPARSITY

enemy, at least in this mission. It's a classic *Company of Heroes* scenario where, after clearing the town, you need to lie in wait for a counterattack. There's just enough time to garrison your troops in buildings and set up defences along the road. I kept the main route through the town pretty clear, but off to the side, waiting to strike, was a horde of tanks and anti-tank guns. When the Brits arrived, the party started, shaking the town to its very foundations. The Brits were defeated, but there was hardly a building left standing.

Even though this final battle has a familiar setup, it still feels distinct from the urban brawls in Europe. In Italy, the narrow streets, tall buildings and frequent changes in elevation are a nightmare for vehicles, but make them infantry playgrounds. In North Africa, the streets are wider and there's less elevation – though all the flat roofs do give infantry another place to attack from – so it's much

easier to take advantage of a mechanised force.

SAND AND DELIVER

The North African maps are in part defined by their sparsity. The settlements are less urbanised, and they're surrounded by a lot more empty space, with rolling dunes that'll give you plenty of room to manoeuvre your vehicles and get into massive tank battles. This is why things like tank riding are so handy: troops are so much more vulnerable, with larger distances to travel and a lot less cover. But this isn't to say there's no diversity.

"One of the really fun parts of working on missions in North Africa has just been the different environments we've been able to incorporate into *Company of Heroes*," says Milne. "We've talked about desert, of course, a lot – that's what comes to mind – but it's more than that. We have these small

MAIN: Looks like it's time to hitch a ride.

towns, and these highway convoys and rocky plateaus or big stone formations. There's so much we can use to add flavour and a lot of context to these maps."

This is apparent in the first mission. As well as the derelict train, I encountered a big minefield that inspired a quick detour, as well as little oases, hiding things like sneaky mortar teams lingering under palms and behind bushes. Like the real desert, there's a surprising amount of life and variety punctuating the ocean of sand.

After chasing off the Brits, I was struck by how different the mission felt compared to the ones I fought in Italy last year, as well as those from the previous games. The campaign structure might evoke classic *Company of Heroes*, but fighting in North Africa feels like a properly new experience. And one I'm very much looking forward to return to at launch, now set for November 17. ■

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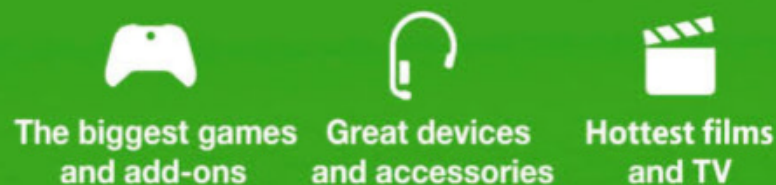


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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Heavy wait

When is the best time to play a game? It's natural to want to pick it up as soon as it launches, especially if you're excited about it. You get to be part of the conversation, and of that initial wave of enthusiasm in the community. You see the big twists and turns before they become common knowledge, or spoiled on social media.

Yet it increasingly seems like those who wait six months, a year, or even more before they play get the better experience. Thanks to bugfixes, updates and DLC, it's more often than not get a bigger, smoother, more refined game – and at a cheaper price, too.

Us journos usually don't have a choice – we're always racing to be ahead of the curve. But for the average consumer, I increasingly wonder if we should be recommending patience. Good things come to those who wait.

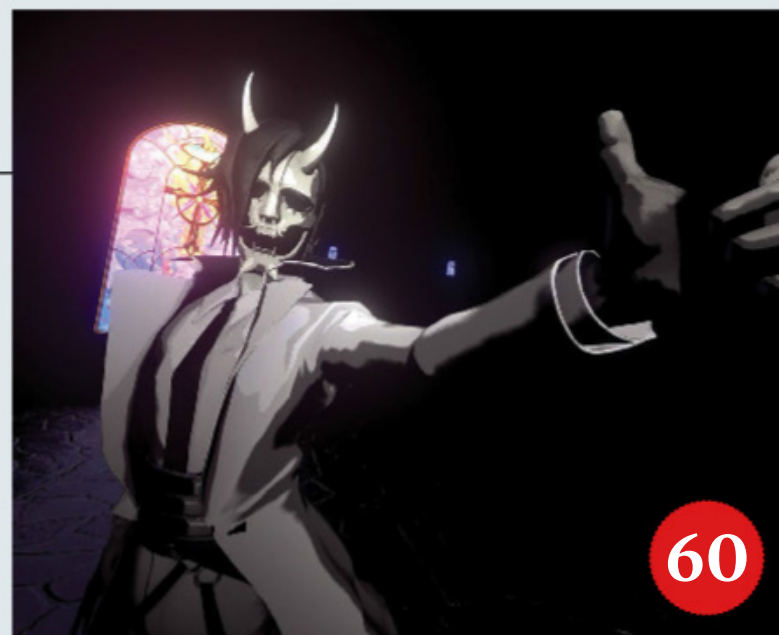
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LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's lean, green and mean reviewers...



DOMINIC TARASON
Specialist in
Shell games
Currently playing
TMNT: Shredder's Revenge
This month
Shredder? He barely knows 'er!



NAT CLAYTON
Specialist in
Wall-running
Currently playing
Neon White
This month
It's Nat's last issue, so we let her review one last parkour game, as a treat.



SAM GREER
Specialist in
PvPvEvPvPvEvP...
Currently playing
The Cycle: Frontier
This month
Failed to escape the cycle of reviewing bad videogames for PC Gamer.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
I Spy
Currently playing
AI: The Somnium Files – nirvanA Initiative
This month
Discovered the pros of scooping out one of your eyeballs.



LUKE KEMP
Specialist in
Pushing our buttons
Currently playing
DNF Duel
This month
Swept in to review an anime fighter while we stood around going, "Huh? What's this?"



SHELL POWER

Thanks to plenty of turtle wax, **TMNT: SHREDDER'S REVENGE** shines

By Dominic Tarason

I don't think I'll ever outgrow '90s cartoons and sidescrolling arcade brawlers. So it was with some excitement that I fired up *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge*, a modern follow-up to Konami's arcade & SNES hit *Turtles in Time*. It's an exercise in targeted nostalgia, opening with a fully animated intro, a cover of the Saturday morning theme song, and even the return of the original voice cast – albeit with 30 years of added rasp to their voices.

That's a strong first impression and a tough one to live up to, but I'm happy to say that developer Tribute Games has managed to recapture that classic spark, even if it's sometimes at risk of being snuffed out by a few attempted modernisations that don't fully deliver.

Putting its strongest two-toed foot forward, *Shredder's Revenge* is an absolute joy to look at and listen to. Even with most of the game taking part in New York, each environment feels distinct, with the graffiti-daubed streets outside the TV station (where the bad guys have painted the word 'Foot' over any sign where it'd make sense, plus a few where it doesn't) leading to a chase down Broadway, a grungy sewer

crawl, a trip to the zoo, and beyond. The backdrops rarely repeat, impressive considering this game's about four times the length of *Turtles in Time*, and far more detailed.

The character art is equally lush – despite sharing the same body shape, there's very few frames shared between the Turtles. Their animations capture their personality from the cartoons, making them easier to track visually in a fight.

When sprinting, Leo leans in with a stoic glare, Mikey scampers along upright with cartoon exaggeration, nunchucks flailing behind him, while Raphael charges in low with teeth bared. The extra playable characters get just as much love, with vigilante Casey Jones comically switching

New super moves are smart bombs that clear your immediate area

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A long-awaited sequel to the classic arcade & SNES brawler *TMNT: Turtles in Time*

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Tribute Games Inc

PUBLISHER
Dotemu

REVIEWED ON
Windows 11, Nvidia 2080 Ti, Intel i9-9900k @ 4.9ghz, 32gb RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
shredders-revenge.com

outfit during attacks – putting on a golf cap when taking a nine-iron swing, or a baseball helmet for his game-winning sliding attack.

While lacking the time-travel gimmick of *Turtles in Time*, Tribute Games has still found excuses to cram in almost every classic enemy from the previous games, lovingly re-designed and cleanly animated. My only gripe here is that there aren't many new ones, but there's a couple of interesting surprises in there. By and large, they're good fun to smash into tiny pieces too, and all feel fitting for an old '90s cartoon, especially the silly crossbow-wielding Foot ninjas who shoot sink-plungers instead of pointy bolts. *Shredder's Revenge* is kid-friendly start to finish.

That lavish attention to detail also applies to the expendable hordes of robo-ninjas you'll be fighting most of the time. Many of the colour-coded variants have their own animations and style, and almost every stage has them playing out some variety of sight gag. When they take over the TV station, there'll be ninjas manning the reception desk, mixing up some trouble in the cooking show set, and doing sit-ups for the



RIGHT: Special moves pack a punch.





They just had to bring back the hoverboards.



ABOVE: Turns out Shredder and Squidward have a lot in common.

workout show. I was beaming nearly the whole way through.

The soundtrack didn't make me smile, though. It had me grinning like an idiot. Composed by the prolific Tee Lopes (*Sonic Mania*, the *Streets of Rage 4* DLC), it has a spectacularly bouncy, energetic vibe. Almost everything is a toe-tapper, and I'm lavishing special praise on the handful of vocal tracks in the game, featuring talent from the Wu-Tang Clan. They are magnificently goofy, belting out cornball lyrics themed to the level or battle they accompany.

SHELL GAME

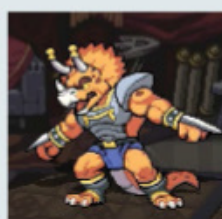
Thankfully, like the art, *Shredder's Revenge* feels familiar while making some significant enhancements over *Turtles in Time*. The fundamentals are still simple one-button combo chains, jumping dive kicks, and grapples, but the Turtles and pals now have a dodge button that lets you slip past (or through) almost any attack with a generous allowance of invulnerability frames. Dodges can also be chained into attacks and out of damage taken, making it a seamless move to mix into your routine, and it doesn't disrupt the game's bouncy rhythm.

New super moves are effectively smart bombs that clear your immediate area. They're recharged through fighting or successfully completing a taunt animation without getting smacked for your



WAIT, WHO?

Here's some of the game's weirder cameos



CAPTAIN ZORAX

From the episode Night of the Dark Turtle. An invading alien warlord, still hanging out at the museum he was first defeated in.



THE PUNK FROGS

From Invasion of the Punk Frogs. Attila, Genghis, Napoleon, and Rasputin – a team of mutant teens that dole out sidequests.



TEMPESTRA

A sapient arcade game from the episode Leonardo vs Tempestra. She summons Tokka and Rahzar – another two minor villains.



THE NEUTRINOS

First seen in Hot Rodding Teenagers From Dimension X, this bunch of pacifist space-elves can be found hidden around the game's final act.





Cocky, Raph.
Cocky.



ABOVE: All the Turtles have distinct poses and animations.

» nerve, which adds a fun rhythm to boss fights – especially in co-op – as my friend and I would tag out to safer areas of the arena to taunt and recharge. Taunts work out of combat too, so you can always start a fight with at least one super bar charged.

Shredder's Revenge has one other new move that doesn't work as well: a charged power attack. On paper it's supposed to be for breaking through the guards of more defensive enemies, but over two playthroughs I found it to be largely useless, locking you in place in front of an enemy that can still hit you with a quick poke. Against blocking baddies, a grapple or super attack almost always seemed better and faster, making the power attack feel like a missed opportunity.

NINJAS? IN THIS ECONOMY?

Here's some things we've seen *The Foot* moonlighting as



OFFICE NINJA

When they're not stalking Turtles by moonlight, you can find the Foot Clan praying for 5pm to come sooner.



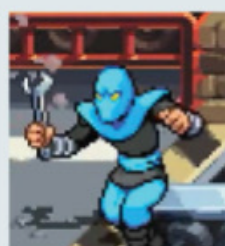
CARNIVAL NINJA

Rigged games of chance ready to bamboozle our hapless heroes? Why wouldn't you want a ninja on duty here?



FOOD HALL NINJA

Taking over a mall is a lot of work. Lukewarm pizza and equally warm sushi (ugh) aren't going to serve themselves.

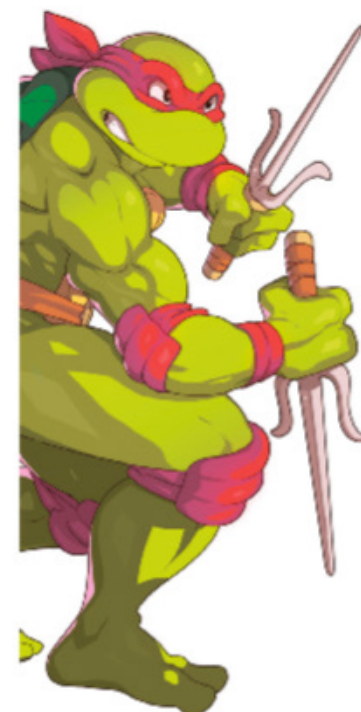


NINGINEER

At the robot ninja factory, high staff turnover isn't an issue. Still, they don't look happy about the damage being done.

TURTLES TAKE MANHATTAN

For the first time in a *TMNT* beat-'em-up, *Shredder's Revenge* has a dedicated Story mode, but it feels largely hollow. Arcade mode is a straight shot through the game's generous 16 stages without any saves or pauses, while Story adds a level select/world map, a very basic XP/levelling system, and some perfunctory challenges and sidequests. I usually ignored the challenges, because too often they asked me to clear whole stages without taking a single hit. As for sidequests, don't expect to do more than pick up themed collectibles and deliver them to a character on the



map in exchange for a handful of experience points, adding tedious (if ignorable) busywork between levels.

The experience system also feels fundamentally flawed. A full run through Story mode will net you enough XP to max out one character, finally giving you access to their max-level super move just in time for the last couple levels. Maxing out all seven (including Splinter, April O'Neil and Casey Jones) will either require six players in co-op or extensive grinding, which feels antithetical to the whole concept of a fast-paced arcade game. In Arcade mode you don't have to grind to unlock anything – it just gives you all your abilities from the start, but doesn't allow you to revisit completed stages or save progress.

It's difficult to shake the feeling that some kind of happy medium between Arcade and Story mode should exist, but Tribute Games seemingly signed some kind of Faustian bargain in the name of modernised game design. *TMNT: Shredder's Revenge* is too easy on the middle of three difficulty modes, too: regular rank-and-file enemies don't pose much threat unless you get careless, and bosses can be surprisingly easy if you get into the habit of dodging through their well-telegraphed attacks.

NOT-SO-MEAN STREETS

While there are some arcade-conquering demigods out there, I

typically have to chew through several continues to get through one of these games, but I found myself seldom losing lives when playing solo here. And in Story mode, they restock every stage. Co-op exacerbates the balance issues: having at least two players adds a downed state, so instead of immediately dying, your partners have ten seconds to revive you and get you back into the fight at no cost.

Being able to revive teammates is convenient, but further crushes the difficulty curve. My first playthrough was in two player co-op, and even with a few embarrassing cases of me spacing out and forgetting which

Turtle I was controlling (a mistake I still frequently made when I switched to playing as Splinter and others, so no fault of the game), neither me nor my buddy lost more than a single life until the penultimate level.

The highest of the three difficulty modes – Gnarly – provides a bit more friction, with enemies hitting harder (and seemingly a little more aggressively) and giving bosses a beefier health bar without feeling excessive. It's more arcade-authentic in terms of challenge, but in Story mode, getting a full stock of lives for all players each stage still dulls its edge. If it allowed saving I'd say Arcade mode was the best way to play, but neither seems ideal.

Surprisingly, beyond Casey Jones (a reward for completing the game

once), there are seemingly no unlockable extras. No hidden modes, no curveballs. While it's nice to get exactly what you ordered in a game, I've possibly been spoiled by some other modern beat-'em-ups – stacked up against its recent peers, *TMNT: Shredder's Revenge* feels threadbare on the bonus front.

GO NINJA, GO NINJA?

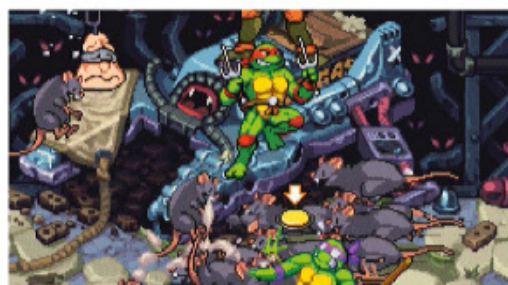
For all my criticisms, it's the little fuzzy details around the edges where most of the flaws lie in *Shredder's Revenge*. The heart of the game, that nostalgic pseudo-arcade experience of bashing through thousands of mooks with as many buddies as you can fit into the room (or over the internet) is strong. *Shredder's Revenge* is endlessly charming and sets off all of my nostalgia neurones.

The issue is in its longevity. The best arcade games hold up even on your fifth or tenth time through, while I feel I've seen all this has to offer after just two full laps. I just can't see myself coming back to it months or years later like I've done with *Streets of Rage 4* (especially with its DLC) or *Fight'N Rage*. Much like the returning voice cast, *TMNT: Shredder's Revenge* is a heartfelt and enthusiastic performance that feels like a slightly strained attempt to recapture lost glory. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Falling just shy of greatness, this is a heartfelt, engaging reprise lacking in fresh ideas and endurance.

79



TOP: That's... a lot of rats.

RIGHT: Their little chef hats! Adorable.



SINS DONE QUICK

Balancing speed, murder, and cringe in **NEON WHITE**'s heavenly speedruns

By Nat Clayton

In the moment, *Neon White* is bliss. A blissful dance as you cut demons apart across heavenly docks, Sega-blue skies raining blistering summer light on your pristine battlefield. As you first-person platform your way across each stage, you're not just shaving limbs off of demons, but seconds off your time, repeating each level until it is perfect – or, at least, until you can knock occasional PC Gamer contributor Funk-é Joseph down a spot on the leaderboards.

But then the mission ends, and a rabble of horny anime goth kids reminds you that this isn't heaven. It's hell. But depending on your tastes, eternal damnation might not even be that bad.

You are White, and you are dead, and you're meant to be going straight to hell. Luckily, heaven's given you a second chance as a Neon, sinners plucked from damnation to do god's dirty work – namely, clearing the bleach-white streets of paradise of a very nasty demon infestation. And after ten days, the most efficient demon-killer is promised a second chance at salvation.

Over the course of your induction day, you're taught the basics of being a Neon. Every day (or mission) is split into a number of stages – blisteringly short FPS platforming puzzles that task you with not only clearing them of demonic baddies, but doing so as quickly as possible. In short, it's *Quake* meets *Mirror's Edge* meets *Trackmania* – and really that's one hell of a pitch, isn't it?

TIME KILLER

Neon White's trick is that instead of rocking up to heaven's door with an arsenal of guns, weapons are instead framed as colour-coded cards dotting the level. Each has a certain amount of shots that can be fired before being discarded, and any new card you pick up will immediately arrive and go to the top of your deck.

Crucially, on top of acting as weapons, each can also be spent to activate a mobility tool. Pistols give

you a second jump, SMGs let you ground pound, shotguns give you a burst of speed in any direction, while single-shot rifles let you travel in a further dash horizontally, tearing through any demons in your path.

It's not just cards, too – the environment and its demonic denizens play a part in building up and mastering speed. Many demons are colour-coded themselves,

meaning you'll acquire a card for slaying them, letting you chain up combos. Balloon demons can be popped by jumping on them for extra

Neon White is a game that wants you to obsess over your times

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A stylish speedrunning shooter that's soaked in early 2000s vibes

EXPECT TO PAY
£18

DEVELOPER
Angel Matrix

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2070, 16GB RAM, AMD Ryzen 5 3600

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
neonwhite.rip

bounce, while doors will force you to spend an ability to break them (unless, of course, you find a cheeky way around them).

Mastering a stage, then, means figuring out the most efficient path through, juggling cards to both kill demons and traverse the map as quickly as possible. There's usually an obvious path that'll score you at least a gold medal for clearing it quickly, but if you want to Ace a stage, you need to get creative, perhaps using the assault rifle's grenade to rocket jump around entire buildings.

Neon White is a game that wants you to obsess over your times in each stage, and figure out ways to cut them even closer. Cleverly, you're not shown leaderboards when you enter a stage – those are unlocked by earning medals, alongside ghosts and shortcut hints to help you optimise your routes. You can, and probably will, spend up to an hour throwing yourself against a single stage just to teach IGN's Mat Jones a lesson.

When I started playing *Neon White*, I kinda rubbed against the simplicity of it. I'm someone who adores *Mirror's Edge* and *Apex*, after all – games where good movement takes time to learn, where there are countless tiny mechanics covered in friction points that take real time and effort to master. In comparison, *Neon White* is simple and floaty, and I worried that routing cards wouldn't be enough to keep me around.

But watching the community put *Neon White* through the ringer has completely changed my tune on it. Those cards are versatile enough that players are cutting across entire stages in a single bound, avoiding routes you'd think were mandatory and taking precision pot-shots at demons half a mile away. The base platforming is as floaty as it is to ensure that all those time-saving skips come from clever card deployment – and while I might lament the loss of nailing a perfect

DRESSED TO KILL

Looking the part in Heaven

1 THE CORSET

Heaven loves an hourglass physique, regardless of gender. The tighter the better.

2 THE SKULL MASK

Every Neon is forced into a skull mask, loaded with a bomb should they get unruly.

3 THE LONG-TAILED JACKET

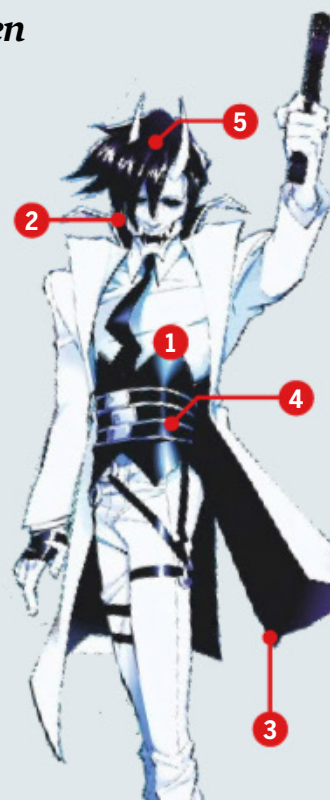
Marble plazas and bleached courtyards demand a stark white look that blows in a heavenly breeze.

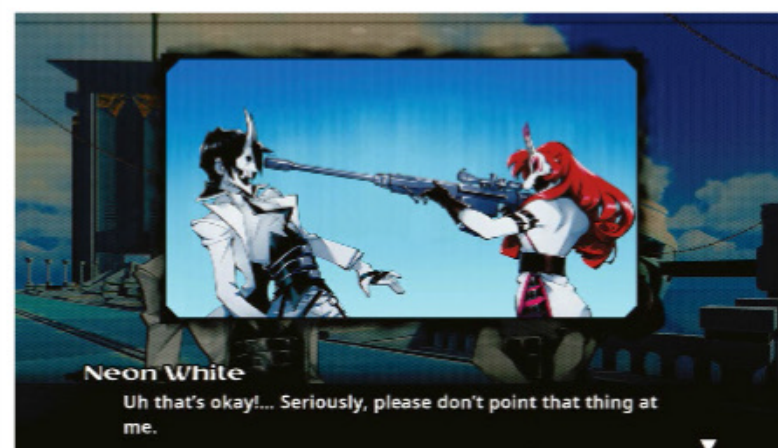
4 THE BELTS (PLURAL)

Belts: they're not just for waists. Put 'em on your arms, legs, ankles, neck – it's all fair game.

5 THE CUT

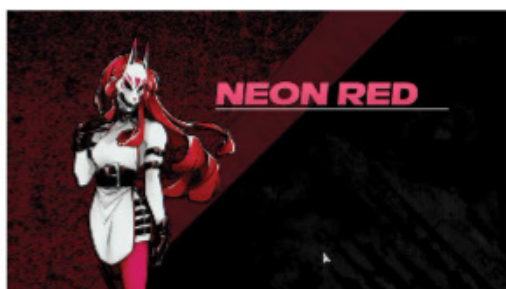
Just because you're in paradise doesn't mean you can't rock a greasy black sweep fit for the underworld.





FAR RIGHT: Kicking off with a Naruto reference really sets the tone.

BELOW: Hope you're not afraid of heights.



slide-hop, *Neon White* is a more confident game for its minimalism.

The only thing missing is a good replay feature. When someone's posting a time a full 30 seconds shorter than my personal best, I wanna see how the hell they managed it. Let me pick and choose which ghosts I want to follow, or view replays so I can analyse their strategy.

DEATH BOAT

I haven't, however, been able to come around on *Neon White's* vibes. Before this review takes a turn, however, I do want to note that the game's UI and environments are peak aesthetic.

Neon White's entire look can be best described as Dreamcast-as-hell. Vibrant skies shine on crystal oceans, with vaporwave marble towers, courtyards, and fountains acting as your battlefield. The environment rarely changes beyond different times of day, but it's a clean look that doesn't outstay its welcome.

The HUD is dripping with flavour text and tiny decorative details, and between-mission menus are crowded with rounded square buttons and delightfully illustrated backdrops. Combined with a suitably Y2K trance soundtrack by Machine Girl, *Neon White* is what the kids these days would call an entire vibe.

It's just, man. I can't stand listening to anyone in this world talk. Your first day introduces you to your fellow Neons, who all fill your standard anime archetypes. Yellow is your dudebro bestie, Violet the oh-so-innocent flirt, Red the tall, bossy, 'step on me mummy' femme fatale. Player character White is basically a goth Spike Spiegel, which tracks with him being voiced by Cowboy Bebop actor Steve Blum. That he's the only Neon who seems to have lost their memory in the process is your in-road to learning everything you need to know about this scene kid's dreamscape.

Neon White is a game for people who love early 2000s anime cringe. It's a game for people who didn't check out of *Death Note* after two episodes and exclusively shopped at Hot Topic. Everyone is clad in far too many belts to be sensible and tight leather corsets (even the dudes – hell, especially the dudes), and your

heavenly contacts take the form of achingly cute chibi cats.

Every so often a stage will be interrupted by short visual novel segments between you and another Neon. But the bulk of the storytelling takes place between missions, where you can explore your little slice of heaven – White's room, the local bar,

your boss's office. Gifts found in stages can be offered to NPCs, while consistently getting high medals will let you unlock short heavenly delight scenes, which might have you getting ice cream with another

Neon or watching *The Matrix* with a flying cat. If you want to engage with this world, there's no shortage of little vignettes to dive into, fleshing out every corner of this sinner's paradise.

And don't get me wrong – I'm not trying to clown on folks who genuinely enjoy this stuff. *Neon White* is earnest, unashamed cringe, and if brooding anime boys are your jam, I reckon *Neon White* could well be your next favourite game. The writing is crammed with references and nods to era-appropriate anime that you'll either get or miss completely. This is a game for

There's enough food to keep a speedrunner content for months

Toonami goth kids hanging out at bubble tea stands, *Kingdom Hearts* cosplayers who've seen *My Chemical Romance* play live more times that they've had dinner their own goddamn parents.

I am simply not the audience for this stuff, even as the game pushes beyond thirsty spirits to start unravelling a tale of theological intrigue (why can't God in all his power just poof these demons away, anyway?). The moment my character started arguing that his dick sweat was just as troublesome as another character's boob sweat, I was done. The fast-forward button stayed on from then on out.

SPEED DEMONS

If you can ignore (or better yet, embrace) the cringe, however, *Neon White* is still a blisteringly stylish speedrunning platformer. It is the kind of game I could easily imagine sinking hours into just to get myself into the top ten of a single track, though from the looks of the leaderboards I reckon I'm a long way off yet. With over 100 stages at least, there's enough food to keep a hungry speedrunner content for months.

It's the kind of game where I desperately hope the developer adds a level editor somewhere down the line. Because with a fairly standardised set of structures, demons, map elements, and weapon placements, *Neon White's* potential could be limitless. What does a brutally difficult 'Kaizo' take on *Neon White's* heavenly speedrunning challenges look like? I'm sure I'd love to find that out!

Neon White is unashamedly a videogame-ass videogame, one that hits the same nerve that saw me obsess over *Nuclear Throne* dailies for a year and spurred a short obsession with *Trackmania*. It's a game for @-ing your friends on Twitter to let them know you knocked a second off their time, a game that asks you to crank up the soundtrack and give that last stage just one more go to snag that ace medal. Just don't feel bad if you need to mute the dialogue. I'm right there with you. ■

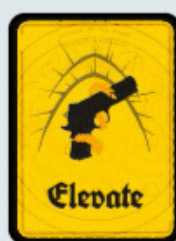
GOD'S ARSENAL

Learn your Soul Cards



KATANA

Simple, stylish, pretty much useless. Still better than fists.



ELEVATE

A simple handgun that lets you jump a second time. Boing!



GODSPEED

A single-shot rifle that gives you a swift horizontal dash forwards.



PURIFY

Blast baddies with an assault rifle, whose grenade can send you flying.



STOMP

This SMG lets you immediately slam the ground with explosive flair.



DOMINION

It's a rocket launcher. It fires rockets. But it's also a grappling hook.

PC GAMER VERDICT

You might love or loathe *Neon White's* willfully cringe anime storytelling, but these platforming time trials are a delight.

85

RE-INVENTING THE WHEEL

THE CYCLE: FRONTIER treads a well-worn path

By Samantha Greer

A sub-genre has been brewing away amidst the tide of battle royales and hero shooters. The obtuse shorthand is PvPvE – which essentially means multiple players having to occupy and fight through a shared space full of baddies in the pursuit of competing goals. There aren't a ton of these kinds of games, but they capture something of the potential for memorable stories that you'd get out of a *DayZ*, with the tighter structure of a competitive match. At their best they are an endless story generator, capitalising on the scope of possible interactions while applying pressure to have players make increasingly dangerous decisions.

The Cycle: Frontier enters into this fray as a free-to-play title, arguably making it more accessible than many of its peers. You're a prospector, a gun for hire in a sci-fi setting with a Western twang, dropped from an orbital station in a little pod onto a ravaged world to scavenge resources and supplies, left behind by the settlers who abandoned the place due to its regular mega-storms.

As set-ups go, it's as ho-hum as it gets, feeling derivative of so many sci-fi games its barely worth pointing to any other than *Outriders*, a recent game already maligned for its lack of originality. *The Cycle* isn't charmless or crass, but its still that uninspired trope of treating space like a literal Old West frontier with little in the way of introspection to elevate it, a letdown from a studio who once

found a fascinating angle on a tired set-up with *Spec Ops: The Line*.

Its specific aesthetics are as worn out as the premise, with your usual combination of bland jumpsuits,

Aliens-esque space armour, and military rifles, with the occasional cowboy hat and southern accent to lazily set the tone. That doesn't stop its alien planet from being lush though, with vibrant colours making all its

green fields and glowing mushrooms pop on-screen. None of the landscape is especially memorable but it's pleasing to the eye while you're running around at least.

HAZARD PAY

Getting off the planet with your prized loot requires calling for a dropship to come pick you up at a specific rendezvous. It's visible to

None of the landscape is memorable, but it's pleasing to the eye

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A free-to-play PvPvE extraction shooter

EXPECT TO PAY

Free-to-play

DEVELOPER

YAGER

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, Nvidia GeForce GTX-970, Intel i7-4790K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

thecycle.game

everyone, making extraction the tensest moment in a match. Nothing stops strangers just peacefully leaving together but the player base is, unsurprisingly, pretty trigger happy. It's made more difficult, however, by the game's showpiece: storms. If one of these violent suckers rolls in, it's time to take shelter and hold out, as you can't evacuate until it's over. Neat an ideas as it is, in execution it's kind of mostly a dreary affair of waiting around in a cave until it's safe. I couldn't help but feel it could've been utilised better if it forced players to flee the stormfront, rushing off world instead of simply sitting around waiting for it all to blow over.

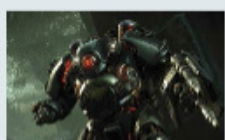
For the most part though, storms are infrequent, and you will be running around a lot, scanning and checking for minerals to find while evading or engaging other players and alien monsters. Those native creatures are another letdown, seldom anything but snarling stereotypes you've seen in so many RPGs over the years. The crab ones, the dog ones... you get the idea. Functionally the only real difference between most of them is the amount of health they have, which leaves them pretty lacklustre to fight, in spite of the satisfying punch the game's weapons have. I spent most of time avoiding them. In fact, I spent most of my time avoiding anything, whether it be monsters or other players, since there was seldom ever anything to gain from a fight unless I needed to harvest their organs for a quest.

CAPTAIN'S BACK LOG

Speaking of quests, when you're not on the planet itself you'll be on the station, which acts like a hub for all your activities. You'll go get jobs from factions, browse shops, and sort out upgrades. It's a cool idea to have a social space not dissimilar from *Destiny's* tower or dozens of MMO hubs, but there's very little to do there that isn't simply running

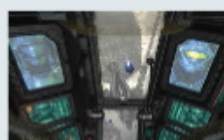
RECYCLED

A few of *The Cycle's* more obvious inspirations



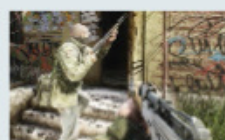
EVOLVE

Hardly the most original game, but it's Western sci-fi frontier feels like a close relative. Only it has giant monsters.



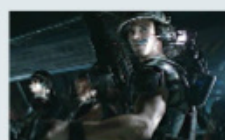
HALO: ODST

The drop pods are very similar to those in Bungie's spin-off, and honestly they're still really cool. We'll give you this one.



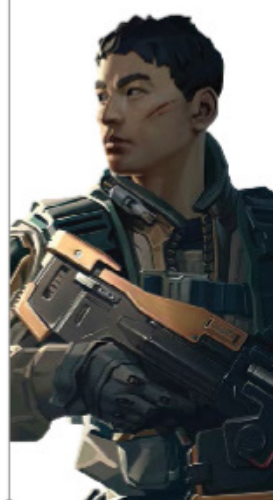
ESCAPE FROM TARKOV

The basic structure is the same as this military shooter, but made a bit more accessible.

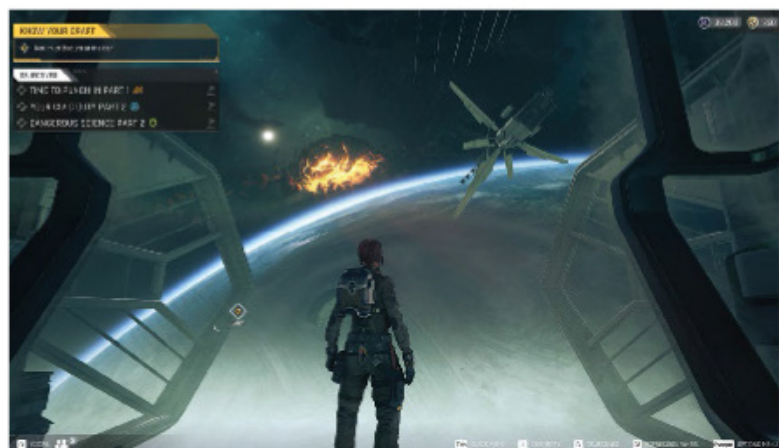


ALIENS

Like almost every sci-fi videogame ever made, *The Cycle* owes a debt to the James Cameron sequel.

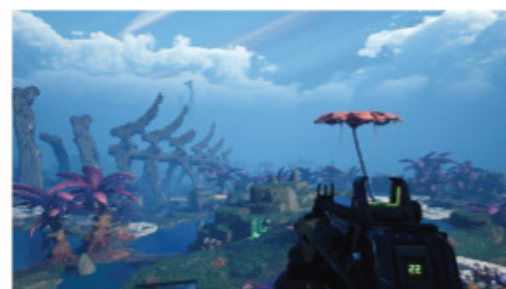


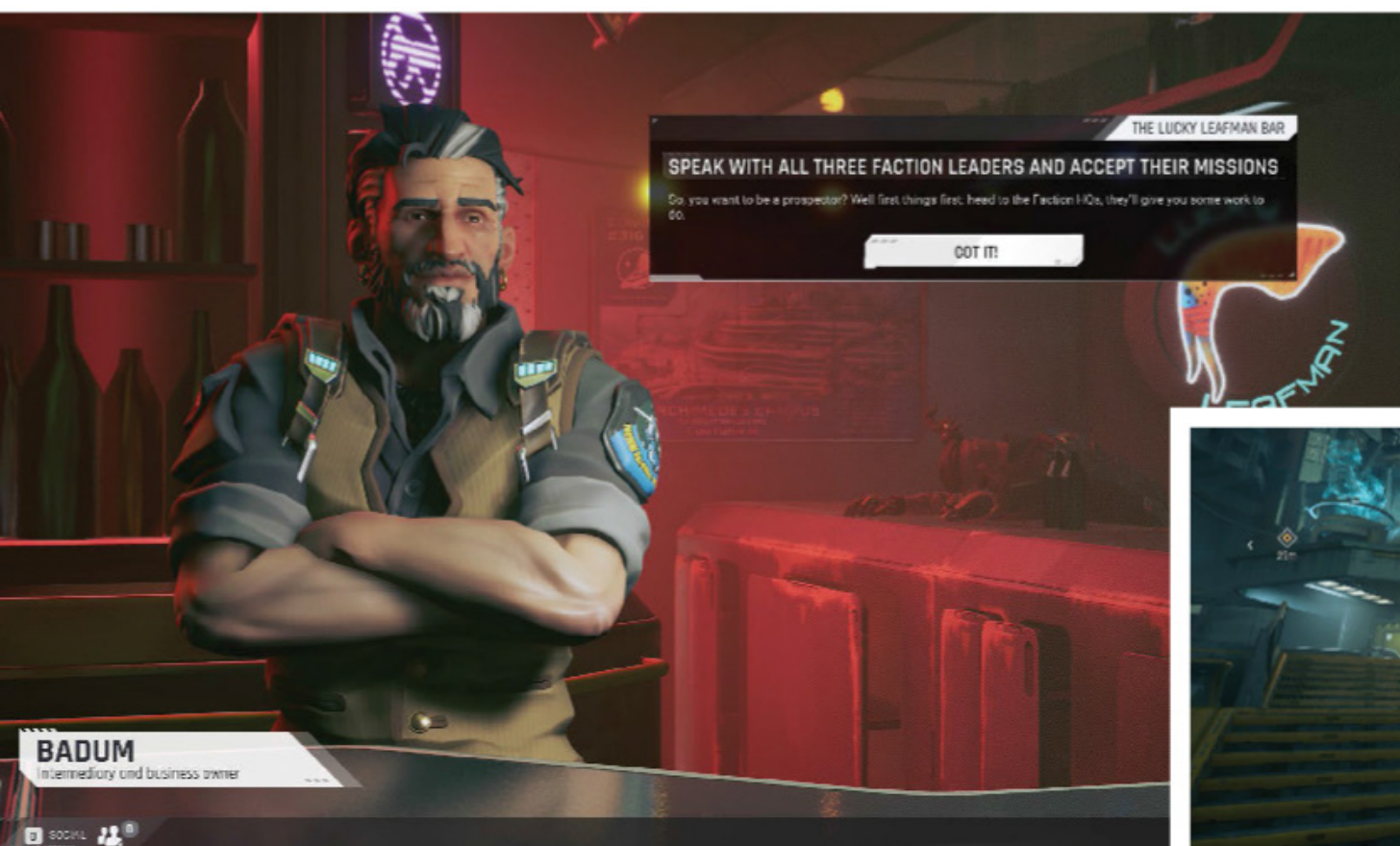
There are lots of rocks, but the game... doesn't.



LEFT: Being able to afford insurance, a powerful bit of escapism

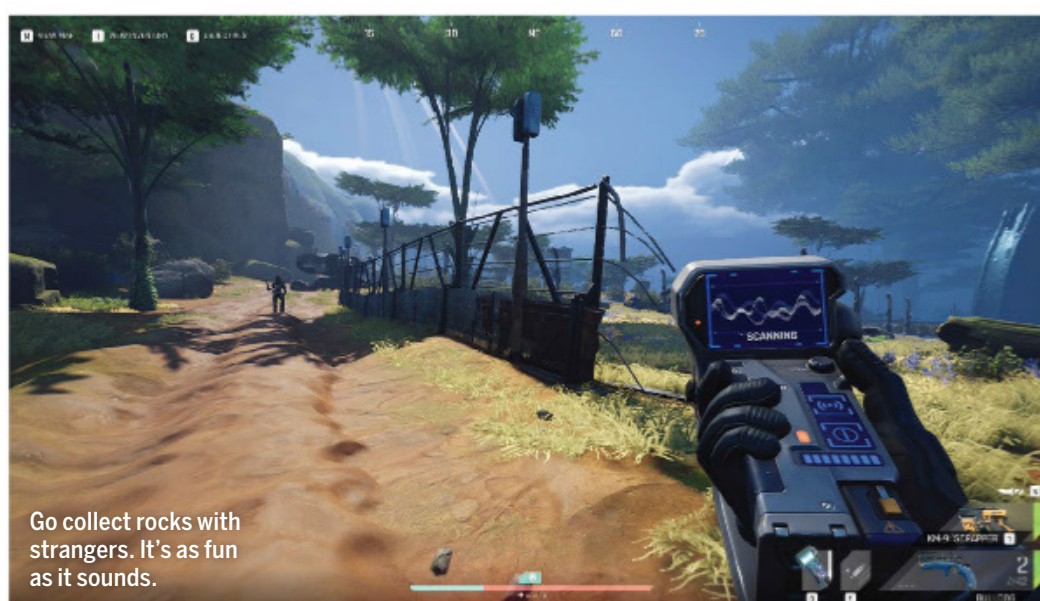
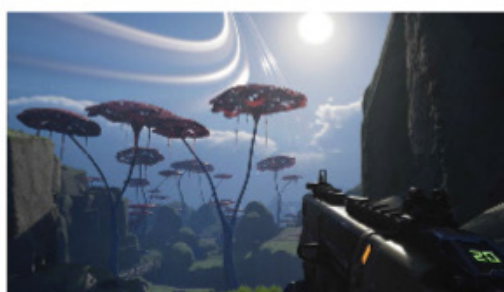
BELOW: Having a friend makes the tedium more bearable. And in the game.





RIGHT: How do you know you're on an alien planet? Big mushrooms obviously.

BELOW: Combat might not be interesting but hey, the guns sound cool I guess.



Go collect rocks with strangers. It's as fun as it sounds.



between kiosks to click 'accept' or 'claim' on quests and their rewards. It could've been a menu, really. It's 2022 and I'm still playing games with the most tired, thoughtless fetch quest missions imaginable.

Yet *The Cycle* clearly wishes to showcase its polish at all times. Whether it's the *Halo ODST*-like pod drops or the crunchy sound of its guns, there's a high level of production value throughout which gives every element a bit of a shine.

The most obvious comparison for some will be *Escape from Tarkov*, but *Hunt Showdown* has been my go-to PvPvE game, and playing *The Cycle* illuminates all too clearly why. The thing that *Hunt* does so well, and I find so compelling about it, is it's never really about the rewards. Sure, there are unlocks and items worth coveting, but the cheapest tools are just as good at seeing you through as the most expensive. No, what *Hunt* cares about is the moment-to-moment tension, the butterfly effect of each tiny choice made at the start of the match to its end. With its only 'quests', its bounties, pushing players into confrontation and allowing canny players to devise ambushes or traps. Point is, your first match in that game can be every bit as exciting and rewarding as your last.

By contrast, *The Cycle*, with its emphasis on dozens and dozens of resource types to be gathered and funnelled towards an endless array of crafting, is fixated on the destination. Weapons, armour, ammo, attachments, backpacks... the list goes on. Even outside of the arsenal itself, there are upgrades for them all as well as upgrades for your apartment and its currency generators. *The Cycle* seems fixated on getting players onto its treadmill, more than it is making the most of its set up. With so many resources to gather and little inventory space at the games outset, I often found myself ready to evacuate within minutes of landing. Resources are abundant too, so I often simply avoided other players, since there was plenty enough on the map for everyone to get what they need. Arguably you'd want to ambush other players for their gear, but new players will have little worth taking. Higher

level players will have better gear, but that very same gear gives them a big and objective advantage, so you won't really be able to take those players on until you have something comparable. At which point, well, there's nothing to be gained.

THE BANAL FRONTIER

It's a poorly thought out economy that seems hell bent on creating a tired free-to-play progression path first and foremost, an interesting game second. This emphasis on resources and

incremental upgrades buries the interesting things about the game. An abundance of resources could foster a different kind of player environment, with frequent co-operation instead of just constant murder, but there's little to no incentive to help others either.

Player battles themselves are pretty dull, with too few options and victory largely coming down to who has the better stuff. On some rare occasions, though, I was able to tag along with a stranger and we'd help each other fight beasts or gather minerals before extracting together. In those moments the game took on a whole new life, as I tried to forge an on-the-fly alliance. Will this random person watch your back? Can they

Player battles themselves are pretty dull, with too few options

trust you? A trial by fire that hinted at how much more interesting *The Cycle* could be if it emphasised social interactions over its artificial grind. It's more interesting than playing with friends too. Having some buddies makes the drudgery more tolerable, but puts you in an even more competitive space, with no other team ever willing to do anything other than murder, regardless of meagre rewards.

Unfortunately I also had my fair share of issues trying to play with friends thanks to bugs locking us out of matchmaking or forming a team.

COMBAT DEVOLVED

What's the point in having better stuff when what you can do with it isn't very interesting anyway? I look at the potential dozens upon dozens of hours necessary to reach the game's higher tiers and just feel bored at the prospect. Higher level weapons might sound a little better, but the main difference is simply a higher damage number. There are no tools or utilities to unlock that can change how you play. No traps or decoys or any other gadgets that might open up ways to overcome well-equipped players. Without any kind of narrative hook or subversive twists, and little moment-to-moment reward, a list of unlocks can't possibly compel me to invest that kind of time.

The lingering question through my hours of boredom and frustration was: who is this for? Players seeking tense competitive stakeouts and shooting have many games they can play that aren't burdened by the sheer tedium of hoovering up loads of meagre rocks. Those who love the treadmill of grinding and upgrading can play games (with vastly more interesting rewards) that don't saddle that loop with the perils of being blown away by a player who has invested more time and money.

Perhaps there is someone who wants the worst of both worlds, to relish every inch of progress dragged to down to an achingly slow crawl. But that person isn't me. ■

MIDDLE CLASS LOADOUT

Is our lowly prospector actually that poor?



APARTMENT

Look at all that space! This is the studio apartment of a Senior Fintech Engineer.



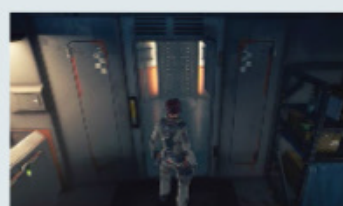
DINING ROOM

It has its own dining space! You could host dozens of people here.



MINI-BAR

And it has a mini-bar! It's not even that mini – you could even have people over for a nice soiree.



BATHROOM

Even the bathroom is pretty spacious! I'd retire if I had this place.

PC GAMER VERDICT

The Cycle: Frontier is well-polished, but is unfortunately undone by tedium and a lack of imagination.

55

GHOSTS 'N GOBLETS

Sharpen your knives and reflexes for **CUPHEAD: THE DELICIOUS LAST COURSE**

By Jon Bailes

Not many games refer to themselves as delicious, but who would deny it works for *Cuphead*? Studio MDHR's painstaking recreation of a 1930's Disney aesthetic oozes confectionary flavour, and even if this new dish of platforming goodness arrives a little cold – nearly five years after the original game's release – it remains a succulent proposition. Just don't forget *Cuphead* is similarly famous for its boss fights that rain merry hell upon you. Prepare to di(n)e.

At least you can jump right into this DLC without completing the main meal. Finish the first mausoleum challenge early on and you release the star of this episode, Ms Chalice. From there, a clock-faced boatman will row you to the new fourth isle, where your task is to return the ghostly Chalice to corporeal form. To do that, all you need is, well, a Wondertart, which local chef Saltbaker is only too pleased to make, providing you can gather five special ingredients. Of course, these particular groceries are protected by burly bosses, and you'll have to defeat them first.

To add a little spice to the mixture, you can play these new levels (and the old ones) not only as Cuphead or Mugman, but Chalice herself. Equip a magic cookie in your hero's charm slot, and Chalice 'borrows' their body. Unfortunately, that means Chalice can't equip another handy trinket, but that's more than made up for by her distinct set of skills – most notably her ability to double jump and parry pink projectiles simply by dashing into them. With that, playing as Chalice can make progress slightly easier, although you may still prefer to use the boys for certain fights, and definitely if you want to employ any of the game's new charms.

BOSSING IT

As for the battles, they really feel like they've benefitted from their time in the slow cooker, as *The Delicious Last*

Course brings even more colour and richness to *Cuphead*'s signature character design, animation, and irrepressible soundtrack. New antagonists have more bounce in their step, greater comic exaggeration in their faces, and some

spectacular moments of escalation in their final phases.

The machinery beneath this extravagance, meanwhile, holds firm to well-greased cycles. Quick restarts smooth the bumpy ride of fail,

Quick restarts smooth the bumpy ride of fail, learn, fail better

learn, fail better, as you dodge missiles, minions, dangling obstacles, and the rolling, dancing bodies of your opponents, which is a relief since screens are often even busier this time, with criss-crossing attack patterns that force you to head pat and tummy rub to escape. There's a lot to take in, with infuriating failures almost guaranteed. Yet once you start

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An add-on chapter to tough but gorgeous platform shooter *Cuphead*

EXPECT TO PAY
£6.80

DEVELOPER
Studio MDHR

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2070, i7-10750H, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
cupheadgame.com

to improve alongside its jazzy rhythms, it's a hoot.

RUNNETH OVER

Between the main events, there's also entertaining respite in a series of tests that replace the original's run and gun levels. Climb up a mysterious rope ladder and you'll find yourself on King's Leap, a castle in the clouds where the monarch tasks you with besting his vassals without weapons. You may treat these moreish examinations of your dodging and parrying skills as palette cleansers between bigger challenges, but it's tempting to simply binge them.

Indeed, the only real weak link here is the final boss that appears after you've fetched your ingredients. Mostly that's because it highlights the downside of chaotic encounters, as you don't feel like you're facing the boss itself so much as the random objects flying across the screen. It's a problem with some of the other encounters too, albeit to a lesser extent, and sometimes it seems that the visuals are lost in the demands of such a frantic action game. Like a world in which Mega Man was tossed into a Silly Symphony in the hope they'd get along.

The Delicious Last Course is still top-tier *Cupheading*. I'd even say a that few of its bosses would barge their way into my overall top five *Cuphead* stages, which equates to a pretty strong return. But on an artistic level, that incredible aesthetic doesn't always feel at one with the relentlessly intense performance focus of the game. As delicious as it may be, there's always that hint of regret when you're served a truly artful piece of cookery, and the only thing to do is demolish it. ■

MUG SHOT

A trio of new weapons to dazzle your foes



CONVERGE

Shoots three yellow lightning bolts in a spread pattern, which can be narrowed by holding the lock button. Handy for covering a wide area.



TWIST-UP

Fires an expanding curve of blue tornadoes that spreads upwards. Perfect if your target is above and to the side a bit. Otherwise not so much.



CRACKSHOT

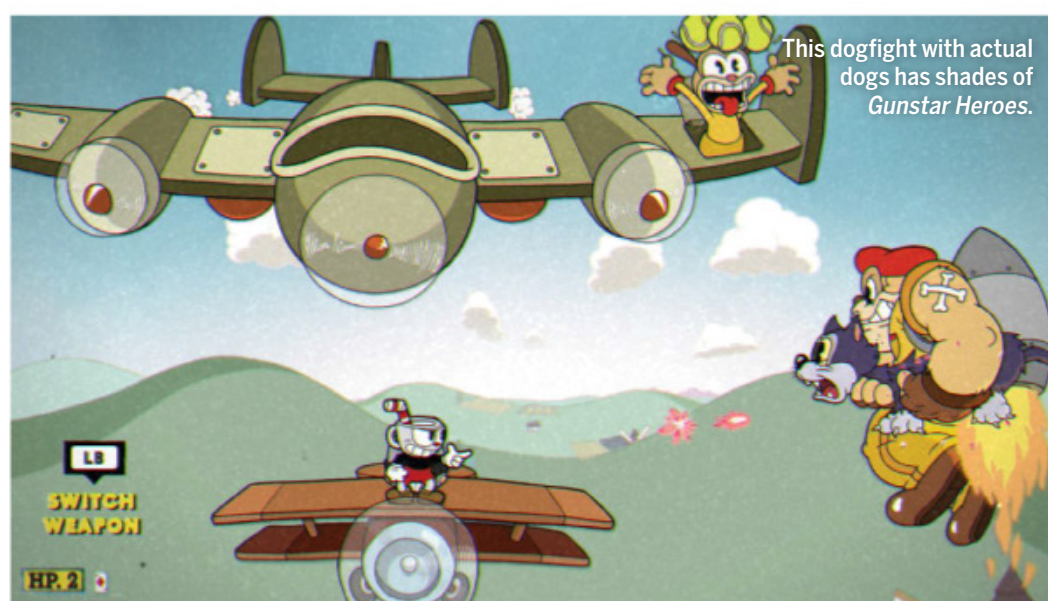
A homing weapon that fires forward then swiftly redirects to the nearest enemy. Not the most powerful, but a very effective all-rounder.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

The Delicious Last Course is a sweet treat that recreates the old recipe with higher-quality ingredients.

78



This dogfight with actual dogs has shades of *Gunstar Heroes*.



ABOVE: The snow giant uses gnomes and mountain wildlife as backup.

LEFT: The boatman provides a fast travel option between isles.



BELOW: Chalice's super attacks are a little different to Cuphead's.



SMOOTH OPERATOR

F1 22 is sheer class, but who hears barrel scraping?

By Justin Towell

F1 is properly back in vogue thanks to the Hamilton/Verstappen controversy of last year's finale, Netflix's *Drive to Survive* docu-series, and closer racing thanks to sweeping rule changes. Every team has managed to score championship points before the midway point of this season. Picking any one of these angles would be a great place to start for a racing game. So why does *F1 22* start off by focusing on soft furnishings?

Well. Remember the 'live the life' ethos of *F1 2010*? This game takes that to its logical conclusion, giving you an all-new living space for your multi-millionaire avatar, which you can kit out right away with furniture, wall hangings, and yes, dammit, soft furnishings of your choice. Other players can visit your space online and admire your race trophies, supercar collection, and choice of uplighters. It's not very interactive, though; you can only flick between rooms with left and right, rather than walk around your new abode, and the cosmetic options are pretty limited. It's also worryingly geared towards microtransactions as you can buy 'Pitcoins' (groan) with real money to buy all the merch, though surely nobody's going to do that. Right?

For the first time, the game allows you to collect supercars

But did someone say 'supercar collection'? Yep, for the first time in the series, the game allows you to collect supercars and display them in your living room to cement your

status as having way more money than you need. Still, you can see the attraction. There are some real beauties available right from the get-go, including a gorgeous Ferrari F8 Tributo, and a rather snazzy McLaren 720S.

The physics simulation for these road-going beasts is impressively smooth and precise, and the softer suspension makes them feel much more like real driving than the raw, stiff thrills of the F1 and F2 cars. Supercars can be driven in Time Trial or in 'Pirelli Hot Laps' challenges, of which there are 40, scattered throughout career mode or accessible via their own menu to

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The latest in Codemasters' excellent, officially-licensed racing series

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Codemasters

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

REVIEWED ON
Dell G5 with NVIDIA RTX 2070, 16GB RAM, Intel Core i7 10th gen at 2.6GHz

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3yKOJeK

tackle in three difficulty tiers. From drifting events to average speed checks, the hardest targets are very tricky. But they feel a tad lacklustre and tagged-on, and it's a feeling of 'oh, another Supercar bit to do'. They're comparatively slow and unwieldy and you'd surely have already bought *Assetto Corsa* if you wanted to drive these things. Tokens to buy them unlock as you play, and by the time you've finished your first season, you'll have enough to fill your apartment's six bays.

ULTIMATE TEAMMATE

But let's stop right there. It's the F1 you're here for and, frankly, the supercars' inclusion only highlights why F1 exists. Fortunately, the F1 content is the best ever. You get plenty of choice before you start to determine the kind of experience you'll get. 'My Team' returns, allowing you to start a new F1 team from scratch, acting as owner, team principal and driver, all at once and doing everything from driving to allowing your second driver some extra sim time. Driving is obligatory, mind, though there's so much under your control, it's surely encroaching on *F1 Manager*'s territory. The only thing missing is porpoising (severe bouncing caused by the new ground effect rules), but maybe simulating poor Lewis' backache is a step too far.

Now with three tiers of initial funding, you can start with limited resources and attempt to build your team into a frontrunning outfit, or start with pockets full of cash and a capable engineering department, allowing you to challenge for the title.

There are also some past stars like Prost, Senna and Schumacher available to recruit as an anachronistic team-mate, which is ace, though their demands are so high that even if you can afford them, they might still turn their noses up at your R&D facilities. Motivation to improve, certainly. As with *FIFA*, EA's servers will download current

GO GO GO! F1 racing, step-by-step



1 Aim for optimum revs and floor it to Turn 1.

2 Try to make up places early on like Alonso.

3 Do whatever Ferrari doesn't on strategy.

4 Drive lonely for 30+ laps hoping for a safety car.

5 Cause a safety car. Damn, that's that race over.





FAR LEFT: Pitstops and parade laps have graded microgames for precision parking.

LEFT: Last lap, battery depleted, Verstappen trying the outside. Amazing scenes.

BELOW: Benchmark mode helps with the many DLSS and TAA options.





Race Winner
Justin TOWELL
PC Gamer



ABOVE: Microtransactions allow you to spend real money on avatar clothing.

RIGHT: Motion blur is excellent but can be turned off completely.

BELOW: Accidental collisions like this are devastating with simulation damage on.



» drivers' real-world standings and car performance, which not only means realistic positions for drivers during races, but also the returning ability to start your season at the current point of the real 2022 season. Obviously that particular magic will only be available for a few more months, but it's still a really nice touch for anyone heavily invested in the real sport. Sprint races are in, too, as is the full, playable 2021 F2 line-up, making this a convincing and complete career package if you go all-in.

Having a rival to beat when you're deep in mid-pack obscurity again makes a massive difference to the enjoyment of the game and you'll find yourself scanning the timesheets to see if Carlos Sainz is indeed the 'smooth operator', or if it is, in fact, you.

The usual practice sessions return and are mandatory in career mode, though they can be skipped or simulated. The skill tree system remains deep and is all beautifully interwoven into the authentic, full-weekend experience, and development points gained from practice sessions really feel important as the teams rise and fall in strength as the season develops.

Running underneath all of this, the wealth of player choice in the options menus is superlative. You can toggle weather report accuracy, the frequency of mechanical issues, parc ferme restrictions... every element you could mention can be tweaked to your liking. Accessibility options are comprehensive too, even offering the option to convert voice chat into text.

There has been a notable push to increase interactivity in areas that were previously computer-controlled. You can now drive the entire parade lap, before manually lining up your car on the grid. You will feel very smug being told it was brilliant parking until your finger slips off the clutch and you earn an instant drive-through penalty. There's also a new QTE for turning into your box during pit stops, and getting it wrong adds a second or two to your stop time. Again, this is all optional, but the depth is there if you want it.

DAMAGE, INC

The damage system is more realistic than ever, with new sidepod and

floor damage as well as suspension rods that snap off and add to the debris. It's not a crash simulator like *Wreckfest*, but on full simulation, the cars are realistically fragile, which is great for fans who demand the real experience. If only external views of crashes were as convincing as they were in *F1 2010*. These cars are glued to the ground.

The core act of racing is excellent, and augmented by all the extra systems like DRS and the overtake button, which can be deployed manually, allowing you to

conserve energy and fill the battery ready for a big push for a couple of laps. It's tactical driving heaven, and your engineer will remind you if you're forgetting to use your battery. The AI drives particularly impressively when it's on the defensive, covering off the inside line. It'll still turn in on you if you're anything less than completely alongside, which is annoying if you've got fragility turned up to its maximum, but at least flashbacks return, allowing you to undo the prang and try a different approach. Taking fewer risks is probably the more authentic solution.

In a rare negative note, direction changes are oddly laboured with a controller, as there's a clear delay between switching steering extremes, presumably to simulate the act of turning the wheel. You get used to it, certainly, but it makes the car feel

heavier, and that's not a good thing when precision is required, especially at tracks like Monaco. There's no obvious way to switch it off.

Difficulty-wise, too, it's not perfectly balanced, with AI pace varying, particularly when it rains. The AI is tough in the rain compared to the same setting in the dry.

TRACING POINT

Surprisingly, the last criticism is that *F1 22* doesn't look as good as it probably should at this point, though TV replay angles do look more realistic than last year, and the on-track action looks marvellous. Your pit crew are still all residents of the uncanny valley, but more fundamentally, the ray tracing isn't particularly impressive, even on Ultra. The effect is applied progressively, so whenever an object moves, the reflection quality diminishes, before drawing back in when it's still. It's something a lot of games do, but when you're doing 200mph, there isn't a great deal of stillness (odd, that), so reflections are usually a bit blurry compared to traditional lighting. The effect looks undeniably beautiful in stills, but certainly isn't worth the performance hit on the track. There are several DLSS and TAA options, and a benchmark test too, though on an RTX 2070, disabling ray tracing results in some 35-58 100fps at 1080p on Ultra, and looks fantastic, so the decision is pretty easy.

Small gripes aside, *F1 22* is simply another brilliant simulation of the sport; the most convincing and exhaustive there's ever been. However, great though the improvements are, it's also the most modest evolution we've seen for a while. The supercars and avatar nonsense make the game appear new without really changing it meaningfully, and certainly don't make up for the absence of last year's 'Braking Point' story mode. It's still an easy purchase to recommend as it's a masterclass in racing game design and plays extremely well, but the annual release hasn't felt this unnecessary since *F1 2014*. ■

F1 ANATOMY 101

What all the sticky-out bits do

1 FLOOR

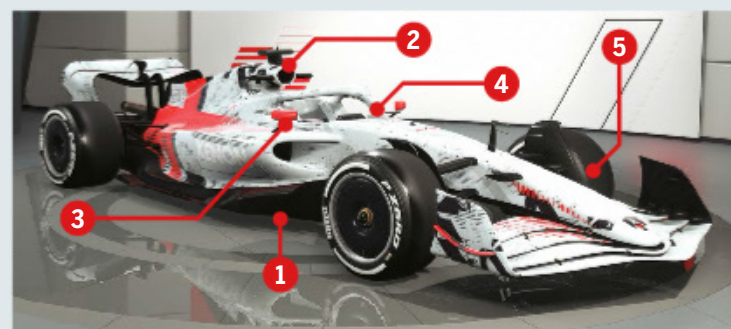
Sucking you down via ground effect.

2 TV CAMERA

Seeing more than the driver can.

3 MIRRORS

Tiny, hardly show anything.



4 HALO

Safety bar that's saved several lives.

5 TYRES

These have to be 100+ degrees Celcius to work well.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Another superlative career mode, but the avatar customisation and tacked-on supercars feel like bullet points.

84

GLORIOUS SUNSET

MONSTER HUNTER RISE: SUNBREAK is more of the same, but luckily the same is fantastic

By Rich Stanton

There are two sides to *Monster Hunter Rise's* new *Sunbreak* DLC. The first sees you in a luscious jungle, gathering bugs and swatting away little monsters as you look for a snail: which you'll then take a picture of, and be rewarded with a fetching hat. The other side of *Sunbreak* is your hunter, helpless on the ground as a furious red-eyed monkey stomps your limp form into the ground. Over and over again.

Monster Hunter Rise was first released on Switch in early 2021, and arrived on PC in January this year. More in the lineage of the older portable titles than the all-singing all-dancing *Monster Hunter*:

World, I wouldn't say *Rise* is an easy game by any means. But it is one that is meant for most players to be able to finish, and this expansion is the opposite: it's for the hardcore and goes for you more or less from the start.

Your introduction to the expansion is not great, a hunt for a variant of the Hermitaur, a crab-like enemy. While it's got some new moves and, hey, it's a new *Rise* fight, this is an extremely familiar monster and encounter. It's a theme that continues for arguably longer than it should. *Sunbreak* quickly promotes your hunter to Master Rank, but you won't see a truly new monster until you're ready to go to Master Rank 3 – which is a good dozen hours of hunting.

BITE ME

Sunbreak only adds five truly 'new' monsters to *Rise*, and some of them, such as Espinas, have been in older games. Espinas is a good example of the kind of thing *Sunbreak* is really going for though: Diablos' bigger, meaner older brother. It's a giant dragon that adores charging at you, repeatedly, and will without fail oneshot you. It doesn't have a fancy moveset, it just adds poison. Espinas hates me, and I hate it. You won't see it until MR4 though, and

Sunbreak holds back a lot of what it's got. Five new monsters does feel stingy, but the later fights and Malzeno in particular deliver absolute fireworks. This elder

dragon plays host to a swarm of vampire moths that can infest your hunter while he's flying around blasting fireballs, shattering the ground and whipping up the elements around you. Oh and it can teleport. Get that

cart and stretcher ready.

The elder dragons are my favourite fights in the series because Capcom's designers make it feel like

The elder dragons are my favourite fights in the series

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
You hunted monsters in *Rise*: now get ready for them to hunt you in this DLC expansion

EXPECT TO PAY
£33

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1070, 16GB RAM, i7-7700HQ

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
monsterhunter.com

the entire world around you is responding to their presence, and *Sunbreak's* ultimate boss Malzeno truly feels like an awful force of nature. Its armour set is also unbelievably sweet, adding the Blood Rite skill that lets you heal when hitting broken monster parts: yep, they got some *Bloodborne* in there.

FOLLOW ME!

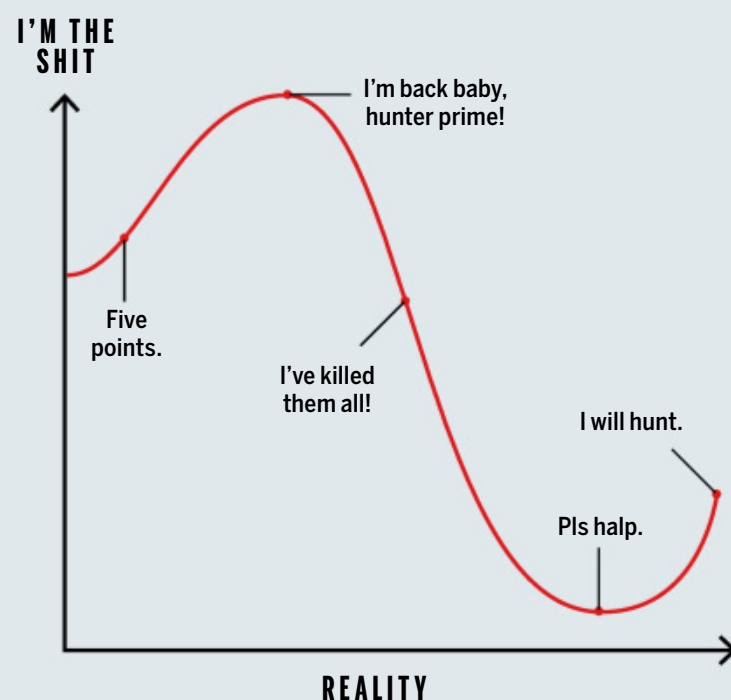
Faced with such fearsome odds, *Sunbreak* does offer one helping hand: Followers. Fellow hunters that will go into side-missions and one, knight Fiorayne, who joins you for major story quests. Fiorayne is heaven sent, and one of the best companions Capcom has introduced to the series, because she fights like another player: maybe better.

An aspect of *Sunbreak* that's locked-away until you start facing monsters like Malzenos is the sheer amount of stuff added in the way of secret armour sets, companions, master rank layered armour... things that seem like fluff but are so important for certain players. Suffice to say that if you're a fan of the traditional *Monster Hunter* endgame, this offers that customisability and min-maxing as well as the series ever has.

Monster Hunter Rise is as good as this series has ever been, and *Sunbreak* is much more of the same. It's also a lot tougher, but that feels like the right call. For some fans, you could probably add a ten onto the score. It does lack the thrill of the new, even if some of its additions are more significant than they first appear, and essentially functions as a proper endgame to an already expansive experience. Less a *Sunbreak*, then, than a sunset. ■

BREAK OUT

The trajectory of a hunter



PC GAMER VERDICT

Sunbreak is more of the same for *Rise* fans, which is great, but the lack of truly 'new' stuff is disappointing.

89



ABOVE: The palico restaurants of course have lavish new cutscenes showcasing the cookery.

FAR LEFT: There's a host of new side-missions, on some of which you can take followers.



BELOW: The switch skill swap lets you swap loadouts in the heat of battle.



CHOP CHOP

Another slice of cyber-mystery in **AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES – NIRVANA INITIATIVE**

By Tom Sykes

Jin Furue has been murdered. Someone has sliced the CEO in two and left one half at a TV studio, where a quiz show is being recorded. The other half of Jin won't show up until six years later, having seemingly died just a few hours earlier. That's the setup for *AI: The Somnium Files – nirvanA Initiative*, an out-there anime visual novel, but with a compelling mystery at its core.

You'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise, given how odd this sci-fi adventure can get. Your constant companion – at least for half of the game – is a smutty AI who lives in a fake eyeball where your left eye should be. With her help, you'll solve the mystery of the Half Body Serial Killings, while swatting off conspiracy theories, creepy viral videos, and a cult that believes the world is a simulation. That is, when you're not battling goons to quick-time prompts, in one of a handful of preposterous action scenes.

Like its predecessor, *nirvanA Initiative* is a sprawling mystery that touches on multiple genres, mixing visual novel conversation with the aforementioned action, and more interactive scenes of puzzle-solving and investigation. Somehow, it all gels together – this generic fusion and the

conspiratorial sci-fi – because it doesn't take itself seriously. You'd be surprised by a *Pokémon* minigame in the latest *Sherlock Holmes* adventure; here, it's just another day at the office.

Set in a near-future Tokyo, the *Somnium Files* games concern a department of high-tech cops who use those eyeball AIs to solve perplexing mysteries, with their real eyeball being surgically extracted. But this shudder-inducing act of

mutilation does come with an upside: it lets them view stuff in X-ray or thermal vision, and walk around in nifty VR recreations of crime scenes.

For the first half of the game, you play as the mentally unstable special agent Riyuki, whose mind unravels as the case takes its toll on him. After he fails to find the culprit, the story jumps forward by six years and into the shoes of a superpowered

A sprawling mystery that touches on multiple genres

GENRE FUSION

The ingredients in this dazzling cocktail

45% VISUAL NOVEL
Talking is the heart of the game.

20% JRPG
They're not (just) suspects, they're party members.

5% THE MATRIX
The world isn't real! Or maybe it is.

29% MURDER MYSTERY
Who's been chopping people in half then?

1% DAVID CAGE
It's a bit like a Quantic Dream game, but good.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A dream-diving visual novel where you solve a murder mystery in near-future Tokyo

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Spike Chunsoft

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/SomNirvana

high-schooler named Mizuki, who is put onto the case after Jin's left half mysteriously reappears.

Both agents can not only use X-ray vision to see under a suspect's skin, they can also 'psync' with their unconscious minds. It's essentially entering dreams, a la *Inception*. You can do a quick 'wink psync' when interviewing suspects, snatching a brief glimpse of their minds. But the tent-poles of the game are full-fledged psyncs performed back at the lab, where both detective and subject are hooked up to a special machine.

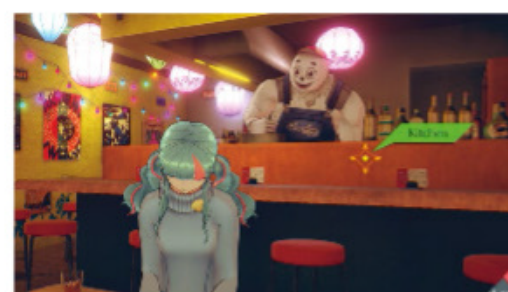
PSYNC OR PSWIM

While much of the game plays out as a traditional, dialogue-heavy visual novel, Psyncs are more reminiscent of JRPG dungeons. Controlling your character in third-person, you'll explore environments drawn from the subject's subconscious, with their thoughts and feelings manifesting themselves. One character's dream takes the form of a twisted quiz show, for example, while another is a fun and vibrant *Pokémon* parody. In effect, they're pretty similar to *Persona 5*'s mental dungeons, but with a focus on puzzles and a strict time limit, which ticks down with every action you take.

You're trying to open Mental Locks, to ultimately reveal a hidden truth and hopefully a clue related to the murder case. However, every action, even walking, consumes precious seconds.

Standing still pauses time, giving you a moment to think and to weigh up your options. How will hurling this briefcase, or slapping the subject, or putting a shoe in this box open the next Mental Lock? But as random as the actions sometimes seem, the game justifies their connection to the subject's mind. Take a moment to think things through, or risk wasting so much time that you have to restart from a previous checkpoint – and on the default difficulty setting, you're only given three retry attempts.





ABOVE: This woman is virtual and she lives inside an eyeball.

LEFT: The murders are accompanied by creepy viral videos, complete with '90s-era 3D models.

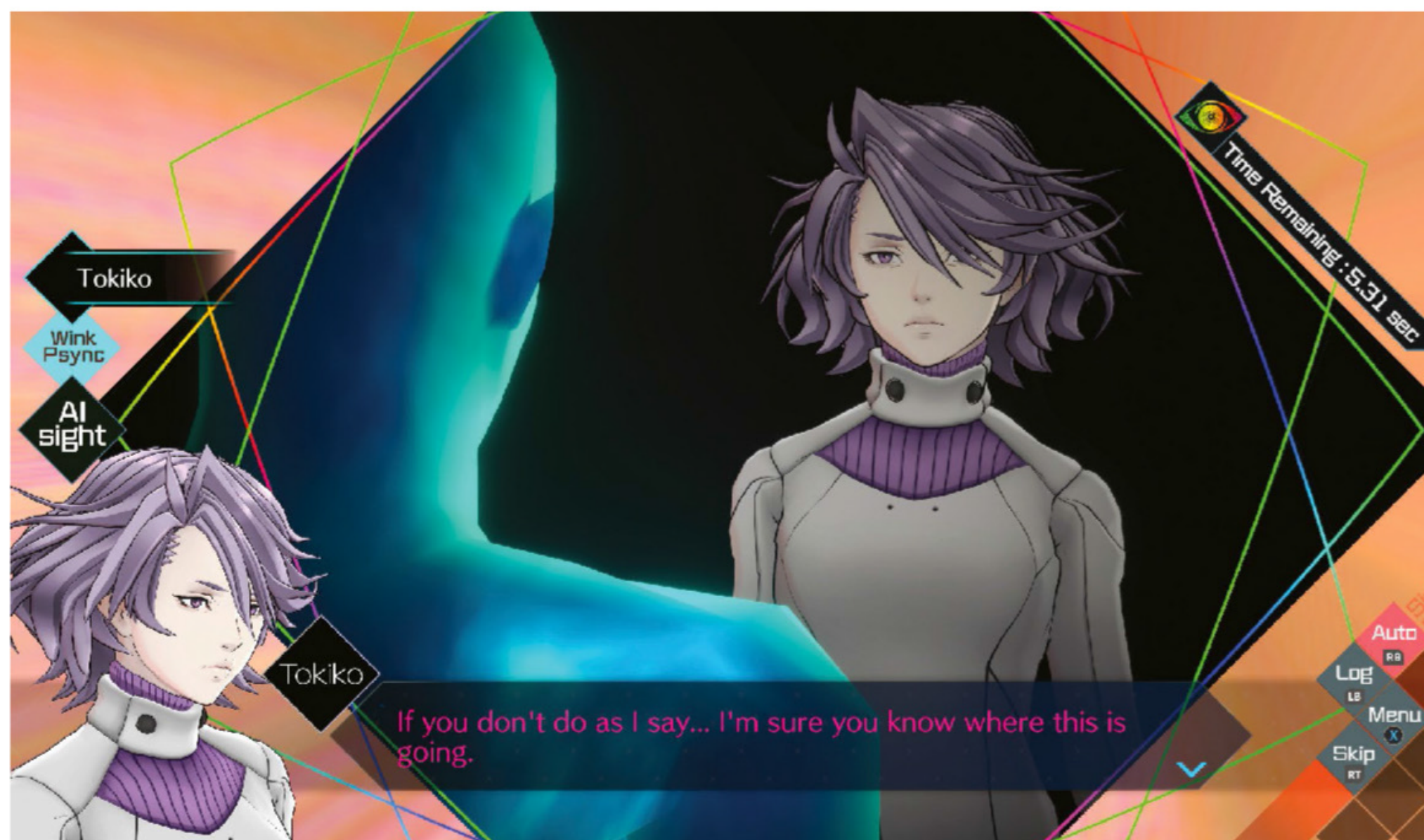




RIGHT: The action scenes are a bit ridiculous, though the quick-time events are mostly inoffensive.

FAR RIGHT: You play as two detectives across two timelines. Ryuki here is investigating the murders six years ago.

BELOW: Here I am using Wink Psync to peek into a suspect's brain. A full Psync is usually required to learn anything substantial.



» I enjoyed the tension during Psyncing, but there are ways around it if time limits bother you. You can tinker with the difficulty, or just reload from a manual save when you run out of time. Still, I'd urge you to give it a go as is, as it's a clever way of asking the player to actually *think* about the puzzles, rather than barging their way to the solution through trial-and-error, as I do in pretty much every adventure game.

EYE EYE

These mind-exploring dungeons might be the focal points of *nirvanA*

Initiative, but my favourite parts of the game are more understated. After each new murder you're plopped down in a swishy VR version of the crime scene. It's here where you feel most like a proper detective, running up to the evidence and examining it directly while chatting theories with the AI nestled in your eye-hole.

Those might be the best bits of murder mysteries: the moments when the sidekick posits fanciful theories before the great detective shoots them down with an arched eyebrow. Well, *Nirvana's* VR crime scenes are where those moments are recreated here, with the player taking the role of the sidekick, and the detective being played by the AI.

But as happy as I was investigating the crime scenes, they're limited in scope, being both small and inflexible in their conclusions. You're quizzed at the end about what you've learned, and you can't progress until you supply your AI pal with the right answers. I know this is a (largely linear) visual novel, and not a more freeform detective game where you're allowed to come to incorrect conclusions, but it's still an irritating way to present puzzles.

FRIENDLY FIRE

Not that I'm knocking the visual novel sections – these were the moments that gradually sucked me into the game, acclimating me with its outlandish cast. *Nirvana Initiative* treats its suspects very differently from traditional murder mysteries, which typically keep their shifty casts at a remove. After all, Poirot is an outsider in whatever country house he is currently investigating – as a detective, it's his duty to ruffle

feathers and shake hornets' nests.

By contrast, here you're one of the gang. Many of the suspects come to be friends over the course of your investigation, if they're not already at the start of the game – and detectives Riyuki and Mizuki are the glue holding them all together. The interviews don't feel like

interrogations, most of the time, but more like friends hanging out, chatting about the case.

Rather than suspects, they feel like party members in a JRPG – memorable characters brought to life with a sharp script

and excellent voice acting. I wouldn't say I *like* most of them – around half of the cast is annoying or creepy, and I remain frustrated by one character's inexplicably cube-shaped head. But, as the hours passed, I came to enjoy being in their company.

Now, that might be Stockholm syndrome talking, but I think it's due to the quality of the writing, which walks a fine line between smutty and straight-faced, silly and emotional. As much as that cube-headed fella frustrated me, the subplot with his introverted son is beautifully told.

Sometimes you forget you're playing a murder mystery – a meaner word for that might be 'padding' – but there are benefits to making you care about this cast of suspects.

As the hours passed, I came to enjoy being in their company

DREAMLAND

Psyncing, Psorted



1 THE AIs HAVE IT

After diving into a person's dream, you take control of your AI pal, searching the scene for objects that will break each Mental Lock.

2 TIME TO KILL

You have exactly six minutes to safely explore each mental realm, with every action having an associated time cost.

3 TIMEY WIMEY

Perform actions at object points like this one to earn Timeys, consumable items that shave seconds off the time cost when used.

These emotional subplots only make it more effective when the killer does comes knocking again.

THE ENDS

I said that the game was *largely* linear, and that's because of the multiple endings, which branch off from infrequent diversions made while Psyncing. There aren't that many branches, but they're used in fascinating ways, bringing certain subplots to a close without you determining the identity of the killer.

In any other game those would be the bad endings, but they can be weirdly happy here, providing NPCs with satisfying endings at the expense of the overarching mystery. Return to a previous chapter, in order to diverge down the 'true' path, and those touching conclusions may never happen. Sure, as a result you've solved the mystery of the Half Body Serial Killings – but at what cost?

That true path begins in the past, with mentally unstable special agent Ryuki being assigned to the case, and it concludes six years later, as superpowered high-schooler Mizuki takes over from him. There's a symmetry to the investigation that obviously echoes the bodies cut in two, and I enjoyed returning later to see how the NPCs were getting on, even if surprisingly little actually changes in the intervening years.

The game does feel drawn-out, however, that time-jump included. I ultimately came to groan whenever I knew a Psync was coming, as that would be *another* half-hour added for no good reason. Oh, there are flimsy excuses given for the subjects' refusal to share info, but this is a story that sometimes feels baggy and overlong.

I didn't mind that too much though, in a game that mixes genres with aplomb, and that holds onto its mystery as it indulges in conspiracy theories. It's a philosophical sci-fi story, but with clear limits to its future tech, and ultimately reasonable explanations for its impossible crimes. Above all, this is a game that respects the art of the detective story, and that does a decent job of presenting its own. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Come for the mystery, stay for the characters, in this baggy but compelling visual novel sequel.

83



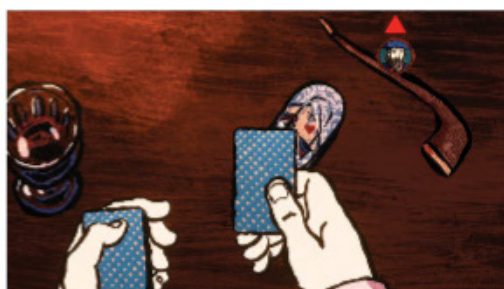
Pour behaviour.



RIGHT: Are you watching carefully?

FAR RIGHT: The devil is in the details.

BELOW: Going barny.



Gontrand

Run it again. I want to make a wager!

GO PHISH

Stack the deck in your favour in **CARD SHARK**

By Imogen Mellor

There are plenty of card games around these days. From *Hearthstone* to *Inscription* to *Slay the Spire*, deck-builders are everywhere. But *Card Shark* is different. It's not about mastering the rules, it's about cheating your opponents. It's set in the early 17th century, while Louis XV is on the throne, and you play a young mute boy on a whirlwind adventure, avoiding prison, cheating death (literally), and emptying the pockets of the French nobility.

After your soon-to-be teacher Comte de Saint-Germain enters the inn you're working in, your life changes forever. Suddenly you're on the run, wanted dead by the king. The Comte is a master trickster, and it's your job as his new apprentice is to assist him.

Every new encounter requires a new card technique. These start out easy, but become difficult quickly. You learn

shuffling techniques, sleight of hand, and even some fencing tactics. You don't have much influence over the plot, but with how involved the process of learning and executing techniques can be, the narrative beats serve more as a little break for your brain than anything else.

Card Shark is the closest I've seen a game get to mimicking character actions with a gamepad – it's best played with a controller. Amazingly, in this format, each trick you learn corresponds perfectly with your movements. Searching a card deck requires you flicking your thumb

slowly to find the Aces you need. Tossing cards requires just the right amount of force by holding the thumbstick in just the right place. And getting these tricks right relies

on actual precision. As you practise you get better and more fluid, just as you would if you were learning these techniques with a real deck of cards.

A small downside is that *Card Shark* isn't a game you can spend a

significant amount of time away from before coming back. Recalling exactly how to do a trick under relentless time pressure is difficult. There isn't much room for training outside of the first time you learn each trick, either.

There are areas to earn a little cash in between the main story, which allow you to try out tactics you've already learned, but the game limits your options to just three techniques each time. When there are 28 tricks to learn total, it can feel like it's your brain cells getting shuffled. Play through it all in one go, or in a few sessions close together,

The first trick you learn, The Bottle of Cahors, is simple

and your experience will be much better for it.

ACES HIGH

While playing, my desk became littered with notes, and I'd suggest you too keep a pen and paper handy. The first trick you learn, The Bottle of Cahors, is simple. Look over a player's shoulder while pouring wine and count the most numerous suit in their hand. Then clean the table in a pattern that signals to your partner that same suit. But by the time you're at The Indiscret Thief, trick five of twenty-eight, you're stacking two decks together to favour your partner, having to make a note of which cards have been duplicated so you can extract them a few moments later.

You also revisit tricks with improvements. The Bottle of Cahors becomes The Bottle of Bordeaux where not only do you signal a suit to your partner but you signal the exact number of cards their opponent has. The Bottle of Bordeaux becomes The Bottle of Burgundy when you lift a glass to signal if the card in a player's hand is a face card. Your knowledge expands at a staggering rate.

Each trick has its own mechanics to master. Holding fingers up, in-joking, raising and lowering, or picking up cards from the left or from the right. There's a depth to every trick that requires genuine thought and a calm temperament, just like pulling off magic in reality.

Mechanically, *Card Shark* is glorious. Its visuals are charming and its music is delightful. It's a card game like no other, and as someone with no prior knowledge of magic tricks, I now feel enlightened as to how the hustle could be afoot with just the smallest flex of a finger. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An adventure about gambling and sleight of hand, set in 17th century France

EXPECT TO PAY
£17

DEVELOPER
Nerial

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 5 3600X, 32GB RAM, RTX 2070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3bYwLfs

SHARK TALE

The protagonist is limited to just a few, crucial, expressions



1. Wow I really, really love sharks.



2. Sacré bleu, is that a shark?



3. I am so honoured to have met a shark.



4. Wait, that's just a sea bass.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A very different kind of card game than the deck-builders we're used to, with a fresh magic all of its own.

87

CROWN DUELS

DNF DUEL makes starting a fight fun for everyone

By Luke Kemp

A shirtless, phenomenally ripped man with spiky hair and a sword the size of a Smeg fridge-freezer, and a woman who pulls out a bazooka for one of her weakest attacks? Yup, this is another anime-styled beat-'em-up to hurl onto the pile. That said, you'll want to give this one your attention. The glorious excesses of the character design and attack animations are here to decorate, not distract from the gameplay.

Although it's based on the MMORPG *Dungeon Fighter Online*, you don't need to know anything about that for this (and not just because *BlazBlue* and *Guilty Gear* have already taught Arc System Works fans to expect largely impenetrable storytelling). What you do need to know is that *DNF Duel* is built on smart yet surprisingly accessible systems.

Take damage, for example. There are two types: red damage and white damage. Red works the way you'd expect, ie it's a portion of the health bar that is gone immediately and permanently. White, on the other hand, will slowly regenerate if you can keep yourself from getting hit again for a time. Most attacks result in a chunk of white damage, and a little red.

Each character has special attacks that require a chunk of their

slowly-regenerating MP gauge to activate. These MP attacks, if not blocked, deal nothing but red damage – and instantly convert any white damage your opponent is carrying to red. I'll come back to MP attacks, but what should already be clear is that using weaker attacks to 'bank' white damage on your opponent's health bar to obliterate later is a valid, and often important, tactic.

This is incredibly welcoming to genre newcomers

HIT ME BABY
Fundamentally, that's as complicated as the game gets – or, more accurately, *DNF Duel* goes out of its way to provide explanations to those who might need them. There's plenty in the systems that can and will only be fully exploited at high-level play, but this is *incredibly* welcoming to genre newcomers.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A beat-'em-up that forces style and substance to make friends

EXPECT TO PAY
£41

DEVELOPER
Arc System Works, EIGHTING Co, NEOPLE

PUBLISHER
NEOPLE, NEXON

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
dd.nexon.com/en/main

This is partly due to the tutorial mode. The command list will not only tell you how to perform each move, with a brief clip, it will even give you hints about how to use the move offensively or defensively. It'll tell you, for example, if a move is good for defending against aerial attacks, for finishing a combo, or if/how it could leave you vulnerable.

Surprisingly perhaps, there's no auto-combo option. You know, where if you hammer one button repeatedly like an angry chimpanzee you can trigger a smooth set of devastating moves? That's not an option here. But it's not needed. There's a wonderful simplicity to the controls: every attack is triggered with either just one button press, or one button press in conjunction with holding a single direction (a few have options for slightly more complicated inputs if you prefer).

Yes, this means that button-bashers have the full range of attacks at their grubby fingertips (including many that reach mostly or fully across the length of the screen), but skill will always win out. Everything except throws can be blocked. Everybody has a forward dodge that can harmlessly pass through anything. A mistimed attack will leave an opponent completely vulnerable for a split second, and that's all you need to deal some incredibly serious damage.

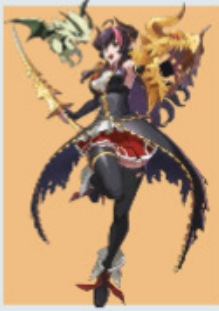
It's a four-button fighter at heart. Two buttons are for regular attacks, very weak, but the fastest in your arsenal and they're great for starting up combos. Another button is for your special attacks. These are much more powerful, and can be used without restriction, but never threaten to unbalance the game. Ghostblade, for example, has a special technique where he teleports through his opponent multiple times, slashing them with his sword on each pass. If the first hit is blocked, though, it's very easy to punish him for trying.

VERY FIGHTENING

Four ferocious fighting fellows and fellowettes



RANGER
Has two guns, fingerless gloves, very long hair, and a lovely hat.



DRAGON KNIGHT
That cute little dragon will tear you a new one if you let it.

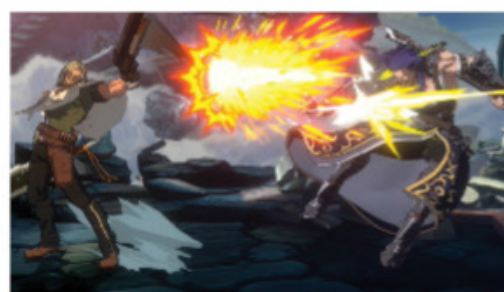


SWIFT MASTER
Wields powerful winds. Probably nothing to do with his fibre intake.



LAUNCHER
Uses a variety of enormous guns. Why didn't anybody else think of that?

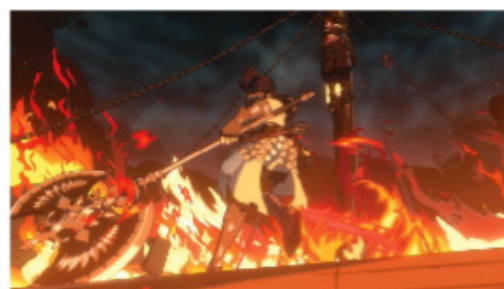
Awakening moves trigger gorgeous anime cutscenes.



FAR LEFT: Casual matches involve lobbies with adorable widdle chibi avatars.

LEFT: A gun and a sword? No fair!

BELOW: The evil sentient teddy is called Madd. I love him.





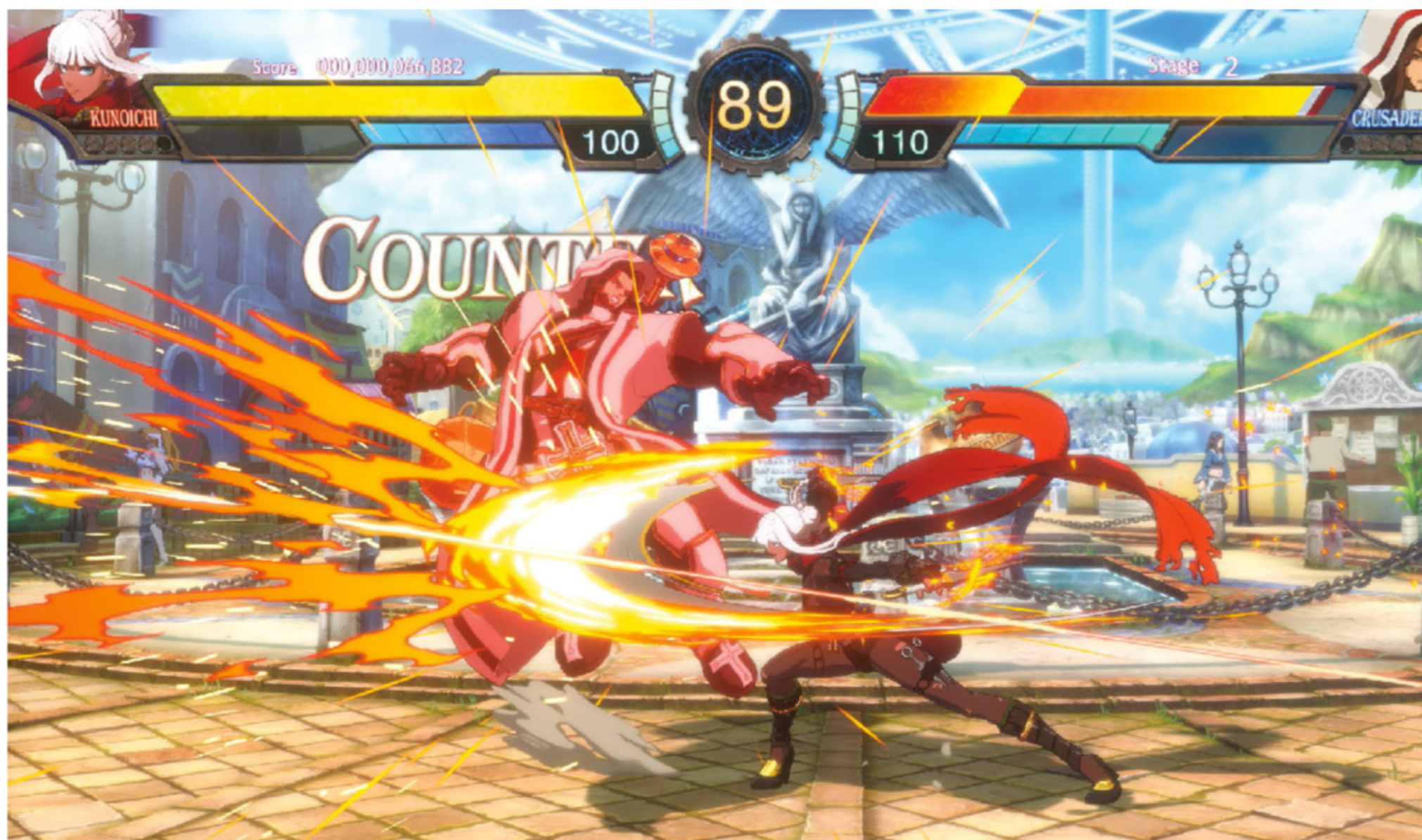
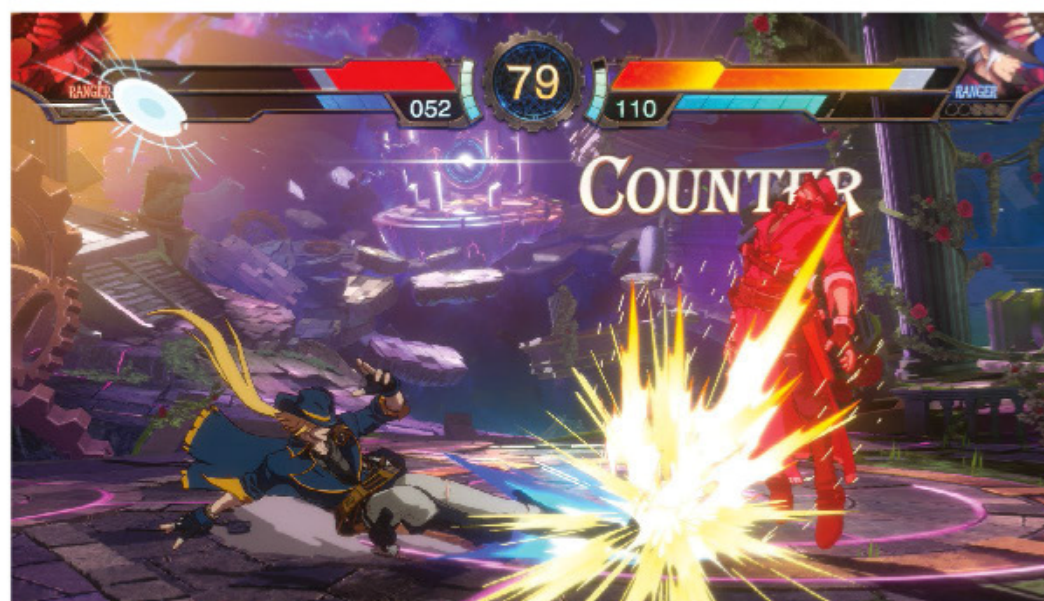
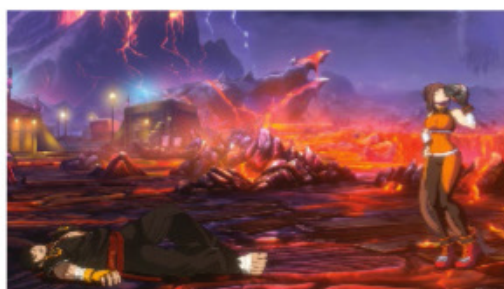
Like I said,
I love him.



RIGHT: The tutorial is SO GOOD.

FAR RIGHT: The art style blends 2D and 3D styles together for a slick look any Arc System fan will recognise.

BELOW: The flashy effects never get in the way of play.



» SWORDED, RESPECT DUE

It's really the MP attacks, and their relation to the red/white damage system, that will cut a clear line between the good players and the *great* players, and where the slightly more complex elements of the game branch out from. You start out with 100 MP, the maximum increasing as you take more and more damage. MP move costs mean that, initially, you can rarely perform more than a few in a row before exhausting the gauge. This stops people spamming them. You *can* perform an MP move that costs more MP than you have left, but your gauge will then remain empty until the excess MP has finished regenerating.

DNF Duel's risk and reward mechanic is called Conversion. With a tap of a button, you can turn all of the white damage you're carrying into red, in exchange for an MP boost. The more of your health bar you sacrifice, the more MP you're rewarded with. In this way, you can extend a combo or make a surprise MP gauge recovery by edging yourself closer to death. It's a potentially match-flipping mechanic.

It's systems like this that give the game a tactical layer, *and* makes this layer just as visible to casual players as to those who make spreadsheets about hitboxes and invincibility frames. That's not to say that newbies will stand much chance against genre veterans, but if they want to put the time in to learn *how* to stand a chance, it's easy for them to do so.

The concept of characters being 'Awakened' – that is, entering an empowered state when they're on their last chunk of health bar – is a familiar one to anime fighting fans. As with so much, *DNF Duel* handles things a little differently. The Awakened state triggers automatically when close to death, and with it, each character enjoys a unique buff. Striker gets a damage boost for example, while Berserker heals slightly with each successful attack. It also grants access to your character's super-powerful Awakening attack. This move can miss or be guarded against just like any other, however, and using it eliminates your buff, whether the attack was successful or not.

DNF Duel isn't more complicated or deeper than other beat-'em-ups. It's deep in a different way, and what that means in part, is that it's deep in a way that is easy to explore and understand for people of all skill levels. I'm not interested in gatekeeping, just good game design, and the latter has been spread all

over the place here like blood and teeth at the end of a particularly intense fight.

There are 15 characters, plus one unlockable boss, just like the good old days. That might not seem like much when the

average *Naruto* game tends to give you enough playable characters to populate a small town, but it means that each fighter looks and feels unique. The simple nature of the controls means that it's quick and easy to become comfortable with a new character, but you'll need to spend significant time with each in order to truly learn them.

The closest character to being overpowered is Lost Warrior (the boss of course), who has three attacks that can hit from any distance, two of which are MP attacks. All can be blocked though, and one can't hit an opponent in the air. Similarly, Inquisitor's gigantic wheel of fiery death can be incredibly annoying to

get caught on. Learn what each character is capable of and you've got a chance of coming out on top.

Beat-'em-ups truly come alive online and, despite some launch-week woes that have resulted in rare but annoying disconnections, that's no less true for *DNF Duel*. Put in the hours offline to prepare, and you'll be in for an incredible time.

KICK AND COLLECT

There are three types of players. The majority play a balanced game, feeling their way around the systems to work out how and when to best attack and defend. A small number however have discovered a character (usually Ghostblade) and/or combo that they can, and will, cheese ruthlessly. Finally, an even smaller number of players have somehow already mastered the game, and will start tossing you around in the air like juggling balls made of pain.

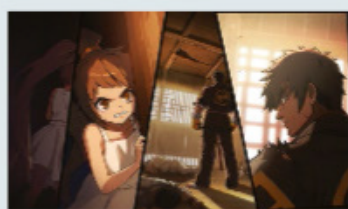
This is par for the course for pretty much any beat-'em-up, but the beauty of this one is that, if you pay attention, you'll (almost) always have a chance against the cheesiest or, to a lesser extent, most skilled of opponents. Sacrificing all of your MP at the beginning of a match for a Guard Cancel, for example, is an excellent way to send a cheeser flying before you counterattack, and a perfectly timed dodge can give you an opening against even the most fearsome opponent.

The more time you spend learning characters and their moves, the more glorious online matches become. Keeping an eye on your opponent's MP gauge will let you know what they are and aren't capable of at any given moment, and knowing the reach of each Awakened move can make all the difference between a win and a loss. This is all easy and pleasurable to learn, because each character is just so fun to play as.

There's no shortage of players, and certainly no shortage of joy when you win a close match (or indeed, fury when you lose one that you got demolished in). This is a game that feels as good as it looks, and that's saying something. ■

STORY TIME

A quick introduction to the story mode



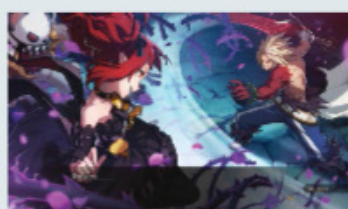
YOU'RE OUT

Striker was traumatised as a child, and wants to kick the crap out of Grappler.



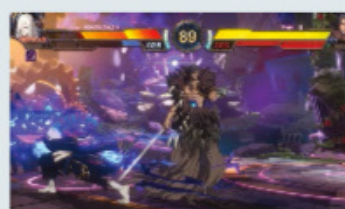
HIT, MAN

The guy on the right is Hitman, but sadly, this isn't Agent 47 before he went bald.



BEARLY

In her story, Enchantress uses her childlike appearance (and magic teddies) to her advantage.



WARRIOR DOING?

Finish any character's story, and you'll unlock Lost Warrior for use in any mode (er, except Story).

PC GAMER VERDICT

Deep and unique enough for genre veterans, yet also simple and welcoming enough for newcomers.

85

CRUEL SUMMER

THE QUARRY is a gripping horror story with plenty of branches and a few snags

By Jon Bailes

With *The Quarry*, Supermassive Games brings its horror shows back to the realm of the teen slasher. You can expect a cocktail of blood and hormones, as a group of potential victims runs around in the dark stalked by someone/thing fixated on their gruesome deaths, and you intervene sporadically to nudge them (hopefully) away from harm. As long as you have a head for horror tropes, you'll feel right at home.

This time round, the group in question are seven summer camp counsellors, and the bulk of the plot unfolds as summer ends and the gang are preparing to leave. When their minibus won't start they realise they'll have to stay one more night, much to the oddly spooked dismay of the camp owner. He instructs them to stay inside all night no matter what, without explaining why, then drives away. So, obviously our heroes decide to have an outdoor party.

After a dramatic prologue, *The Quarry* takes things slowly for a while, letting its young ensemble flex their personalities with no real peril. You hop between characters as the group splits to go on various errands

and gets entangled in minor scrapes, making decisions for your current charge that might have consequences later on. It's a lot of groundwork, and does drag at times, but it pays off in the middle of the game with the added threat of mortal danger.

The characters are *The Quarry's* strongest asset

That's because the characters are *The Quarry's* strongest asset, and it's difficult not to get attached. They stem from a range of horror film archetypes, but nuanced personas, relationship frictions,

and finely embroidered plotlines soon shove them off any predictable course, and make each one likeable in their own way. Nor does it hurt that they look and sound all too believable. *The Quarry* is peppered with moments where you may forget

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An interactive teen horror movie from the makers of *Until Dawn*

EXPECT TO PAY

£50

DEVELOPER

Supermassive Games

PUBLISHER

2K Games

REVIEWED ON

RTX 2070, i7-10750H, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

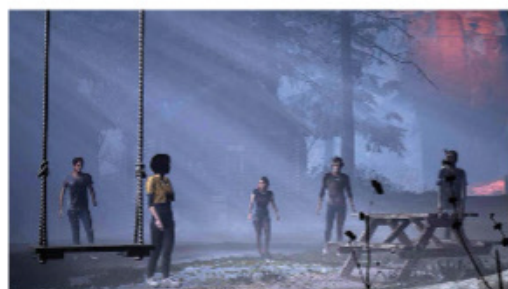
quarrygame.2k.com

you aren't watching a film, thanks to a strong cast of voice actors and some exceptional modelling and animation.

SCREAM TEAM

As for the script, as far as a story about teens fighting for their lives in the woods goes, the dialogue is as sharp a mixture of emotion, wit, and exasperation as you could hope for. The only frustration is that there's very little mystery in the nature of the game's main threat, and when the group does finally define what they're facing, you may have spent a while waiting for them to catch up.

Greater unevenness, though, comes from how *The Quarry* inserts you into its production. In that respect, much of your input serves less to ratchet up the horror than to insulate you from it. Sections where you're given direct control of a character, for example, merely involve scouring an area for glowing button prompts; the gaming equivalent of vacuuming the carpet. And because nothing momentous ever happens in these sequences, they drain the sense of vulnerability. Meanwhile, patches of on-rails action, where you have to mash a



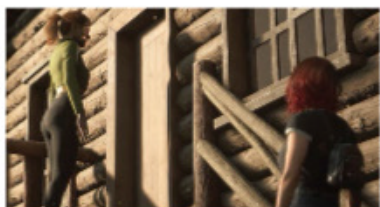
ABOVE: Sometimes the best choice you can make is to do nothing, even with QTEs.





TOP: Your decisions can also affect the fates of a number of NPCs.

ABOVE: Between chapters you're given cryptic advice by this mysterious old woman.



button or execute a QTE on demand, are almost impossible to fail.

Any sense of agency thus largely rests on a wealth of 50/50 choices: agree or disagree, run or hide, shoot or hold fire. And while the outcomes of these decisions can lead to abrupt, unforeseeable disaster – not to mention severing some interesting relationship arcs – this is where *The Quarry* works best as interactive horror. The sheer realisation that a snap decision might come back to bite you in the face is panic inducing, and when these come thick and fast towards the finale, the heart rate really does accelerate. The bloody violence that ensues should you fail is the red icing on the cake.

Supermassive has thus sharpened its branching ghost train formula to a fine point, but other than some top-class production values there are few advancements here. The plot, performances and visual fidelity are worth turning up for, but too much of your involvement seems like protective padding sandwiched between the scripted thrills. You may well feel right at home in *The Quarry*, then. But when did feeling at home make for the best horror? ■

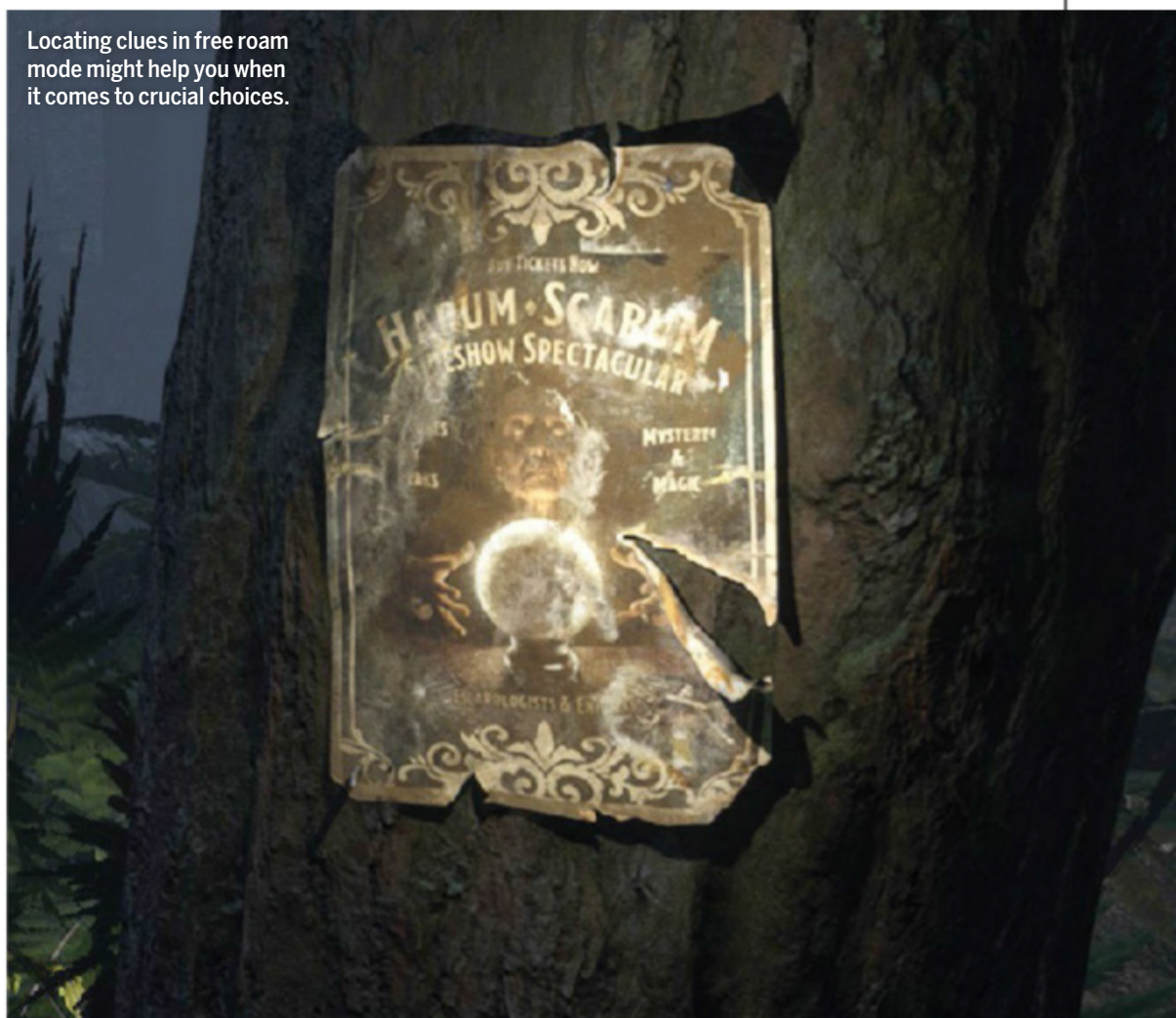
PC GAMER

VERDICT

A gripping horror story, but one where the interactive elements struggle to sustain the tension.

70

Locating clues in free roam mode might help you when it comes to crucial choices.



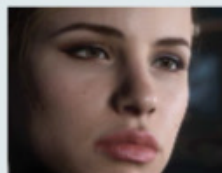
FATAL ATTRACTIONS

Who's who and who do they fancy?



NICK

Cool and quiet, Nick holds feelings for arty Abi, and she him, but neither is making the first move.



EMMA

An internet influencer, she's just broken off her summer fling with jock Jacob, who won't admit it's over.



DYLAN

The camp's disc-jockey has a thing for the quiet, brooding Ryan, but does Ryan feel the same?



KAITLYN

The mature head in the group. It seems Kaitlyn might also have the hots for the mysterious Ryan.



There is a transgressive thrill to seeing Baba escape the confining grid.

BLACK SHEEP

Pushed to the limit in puzzler **BABA IS YOU XTREME**

I love a good grid, particularly when it comes to puzzle games. There's a level of precision to grid-snapping that gels with block-pushing puzzlers, which tend to feel sloppy when the blocks are moving around more granularly. Acclaimed puzzler *Baba is You* understands this, which is why it has you shunting on a fixed grid. It doesn't – thank god – just have your character, and pushable objects, slipping and sliding all the place.

No, that would have been annoying. Maddening, even. Anyway, here's *Baba Is You XTREME*. It's a free sorta-sequel to the clever puzzle game, only everything is a little bit wrong. The music sounds muffled, the congratulation message at the end of levels has been spelled wrong, and – worst of all – there's no grid movement. Instead, Baba slides around as if they're wearing roller skates, underwater. *Baba is You* creator Hempuli has sabotaged their revered original and released it into the wild.

BABA IS WHO?

If you've not played that original, the gist is that the rules of the game are displayed on-screen, in pushable blocks of text. For example, Flag is

Win, Rock is Push, and most importantly Baba is You. Clearing each stage is a matter of shifting these blocks around, to bypass obstacles. Maybe *Rock is Win*, meaning you can beat the stage by touching any old rock lying around. Or perhaps you push 'Wall' away from 'is Stop', interrupting the rules to let you walk through solid walls. It's extremely clever, in the original game and in this short, screwy follow-up. But all it took was one twist to mess with it.

In most puzzle games, the block you're pushing will obligingly move in the direction you're facing, but here they tend to veer, ever so slightly, to the left or right. It feels like rowing a boat, or pushing an

You have to nudge blocks carefully to put them where you need them

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A funny, if infuriating follow-up to puzzle game *Baba is You*

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Hempuli

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/BabaXtreme

asteroid, thanks to a physics system that feels borrowed from another genre. Consequently, you have to nudge blocks carefully to actually put them where you need them.

As a result, this is the rare puzzle game where solving the puzzle is generally the easy bit. The *real* challenge comes from putting your theories into practice, as you inch blocks into place, before balling it up at the last second and having to restart the entire stage.

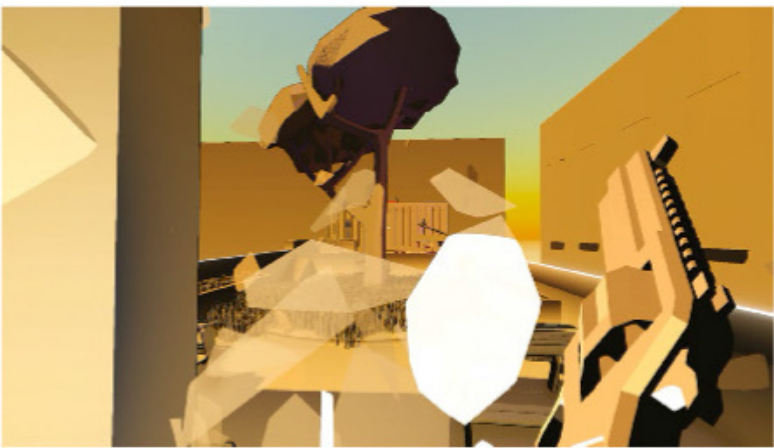
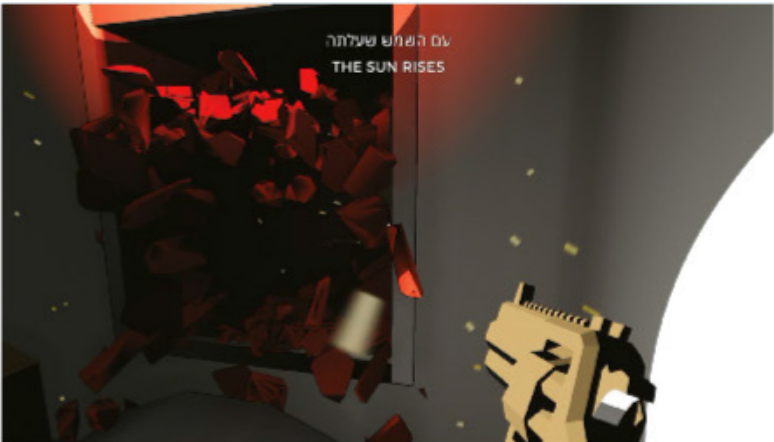
This is a frustrating game, but I was smiling as I filled the air with swear words. It's also a devious deconstruction of the block-pushing engine, which knows just which wires to cut to flood it with water. The puzzles are still creative and smart, but there's a single change, done on purpose, that often makes it a maddening game to actually play. *Baba Is You XTREME* is one brilliant practical joke. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A puzzle game that's equally clever and frustrating. Too impish to hate, though not especially fun to play.

61

BELOW: The gun has a satisfying heft, but there's no combat.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
DancingEngie

LINK
bit.ly/VenusGame

MIRROR MIRROR

Play a music video in **VENUS LOOKS FOR JUPITER**

Fans of first-person parkour have had a difficult wait since *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* neatly restarted and axed the nascent series. Where to now for our rooftop leaping? *Venus Looks for Jupiter* will scratch that itch, if only fleetingly. It's *Mirror's Edge* as a playable music video.

And I mean that literally. *Venus* is set to a track by Israeli rock musician Elisha Banai, with the lyrics flashing up as you jump, slide, mantle and wall-run through its minimalist high-rise world. You'll recognise the red doors (every interactable is helpfully painted red) from *Mirror's Edge*, and indeed the movement has a similar feel, albeit less weighty than DICE's demanding parkour game.

Still, *Venus* comes close, which is a remarkable feat in our world of dashed parkour dreams.

As it's roughly set to the length of the track (sections will loop if you take too long), Venus finds Jupiter after all of five minutes. There's just enough time to enjoy a pretty good rock song and nod appreciatively at Venus' neat gimmick: a gun you'll use to shoot open doors, and generally fire red things back and forth to aid your progress. The gun feels great, and I like that there are no enemies to sully it. Play *Venus* just once and you'll come away grinning.

It lost something in the replay for me, as I refreshed my memory after a long gap and tested out Speedrun mode. The game can be rough visually, with a weird light emission stuck to your feet and environments that looked like they've been plucked from a Unity demo.

Enthusiasm rescues it – for Elisha Banai and for *Mirror's Edge*. ■

68

ANIMAL CONTROL

Standing on the shoulders of gorillas in **STACK ZOO**

Devious platformer *Stack Zoo* asks you to think while you're leaping around. Beating each level isn't a matter of reaching the exit without dying, but figuring out how to reach it with the stack of humans and animals that have been allotted to you.

You're moving multiple characters here, who travel together in an animal totem pole. Starting with just one creature, every time you hop on another's shoulders they get added to the totem pole, moving together as a single entity with the arrow keys.

You control the creature at the bottom of the stack, and the weird part is what happens when you press the jump key: the animals above you leap off, and control switches to the creature immediately above you. Each being is effectively a double-jump – though stacks can be several

animals tall, letting you leap in mid-air multiple times. Ultimately you're left with just one creature, although you only need one to cross the exit tape and beat each stage.

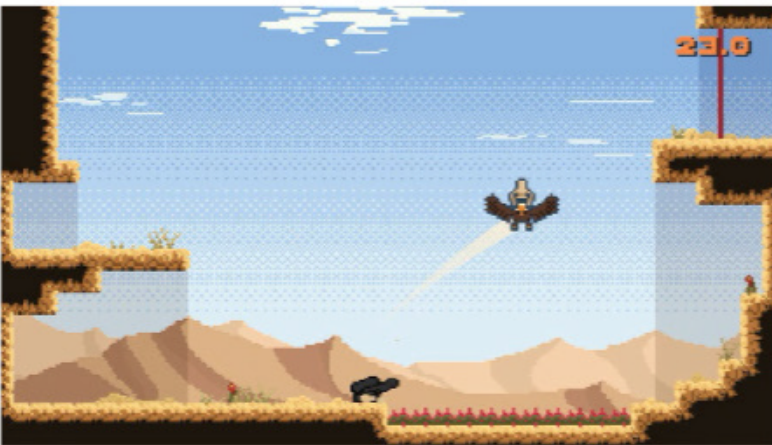
It's a peculiar system, complicated by the animals themselves. Each one controls differently, from the Mario-esque human to the wall-jumping goat, and the eagle that can dash horizontally.

Stack Zoo is a true original: a novel puzzle-platformer set over a generous number of levels, which will really test your ability to wield these creatures. You might begin with the gorilla, throwing the rest of the stack across the map before the goat steps in to wall-jump to victory.

I'm impressed by its ingenuity, but humbled by its challenge. Ideally, as well as being a puzzle fan, you're also good at *Super Meat Boy*. ■

80

BELOW: Spikes = a creature's instant death.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
AggeN

LINK
bit.ly/StackZoo

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

Only the bravest entertainers dare learn The Dance of the Flaming Armpits



BAO DOWN

Being a terrible criminal and a worse cop in **SLEEPING DOGS: DEFINITIVE EDITION**

There's a moment close to the start of *Sleeping Dogs* where your doomed childhood friend Jackie jokes about how shit the police are in Hong Kong. "No wonder there's so many criminals in this town," he says. "These cops suck!" As an undercover officer who's accidentally killed three civilians while transporting a truckload of stolen watches, it's incredibly difficult to disagree with his observations.

It's one of many paradoxes in *Sleeping Dogs*. As deep cover operative Wei Shen you're a goody, but the absurd level of violence and collateral damage makes me wonder how I'll avoid being in a moral deficit once the credits roll.

Yes, I took down a fearsome triad organisation. But also crushed someone's nan and chopped a man's face up with a fan. I'm not exactly Dixon of Dock Green.

SIFU ALLERGY

This delicate moral balance is beyond *Sleeping Dogs*' modest narrative talents. The story is fine, but if you want a tormented examination of undercover work, go watch *Infernal Affairs* instead. *Sleeping Dogs* is where you come when you want to

shoot people while sliding over flat surfaces. The fighting, as you'd expect, is a highlight: crisp counters stolen directly from Rocksteady's *Arkham* and an invigorating selection of context-sensitive attacks. You can

It felt like I was trying to find the meat in a discount pasty

basically sprint around Hong Kong, dragging unwilling enemies by the neck, searching out the best object to smash their head into. It doesn't have the same slapstick of *Yakuza*, but wedging triad punks into air

vents is still a wonderfully comic way to enforce the law.

Like *Yakuza*, there's plenty to do in *Sleeping Dogs*, such as karaoke and cockfighting, but it's rarely as dense or nourishing as *Kamaurocho*. Hong Kong occasionally feels like a bustling metropolis full of street vendors and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Every Hong Kong action movie strained through a GTA sock

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
United Front Games

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3P3borW

sideshows. But more often it seems empty, like all the NPCs are hiding from me. In one mission, I try to flee some beat cops on foot, which is already a bad idea since we apparently run at exactly the same speed. But my attempts to steal a getaway car were frustrated by the total absence of traffic on the road. It felt like I was trying to find the meat in a discount pasty, not hitch a lift in a city with 7.6 million inhabitants.

It's nice being able to split my time up between genuine police work and building my triad reputation, even if it is stressful juggling the two. At times it resembles a bawdy English comedy in which some horndog window cleaner tries to date two girls at once. I pour the triads a glass of extortion lambrini, then take the police on a romantic moonlight drug bust. *Sleeping Dogs*, then seems like the criminal equivalent of a polyamorous relationship. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Sleeping Dogs is the only game where you can kill a man with a roller shutter and still feel self-righteous.

72

BELOW: This could be the setup for a sweet German suplex.



ASK FOR MAW

Dark dreams don't die in **LITTLE NIGHTMARES**

There's probably an excellent German word for when the opening cutscene merges with the start of a game without you noticing. One moment you're watching a cinematic. The next, you're wondering why the protagonist is standing still.

Similarly, there's probably a word for the genre of game, popular around five years ago, which exclusively features hapless children being brutalised. *Kinderschmerz*, or something. *Little Nightmares* is a powerful example of both. It's such a gloomy, oppressive world that the compulsion to keep running right is irresistible, even if the game assails you with increasingly awful things as you progress. The only concession to joy or tenderness is when you occasionally get to hug one of the weird, gnomish creatures who

inhabit the vessel you're attempting to escape from. And, even then, my first thought was that protagonist Six was throttling them, like brutal, hierarchical prison violence.

The rest of *Little Nightmares*, however, is comically horrible: a twisted, shadowy platformer that's darker than a bin bag of broken doll bits. When you're not being sucked dry by giant leeches, you're being cooked by corpulent chefs. Some of the horror is diminished by repetition and it's hard to stay scared when you're squeezing through an electric gate for the fifth time. If you ever wanted to recreate the specific childhood feeling of creeping downstairs for a midnight snack in a haunted abattoir, *Little Nightmares* still holds up as an artful, often-excruciating puzzle game. Wunderbar. ■

79

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Tarsier Studios

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco



MOONLIGHTER

After years at the mercy of RPG shop vendors, it's nice to be on the other side of the counter. Or it would be if I didn't have to gather all the merchandise myself. *Moonlighter's* central loop of 'dungeon delve, collect stuff, sell' is marvellous fun. More so because the deliberately stern difficulty imparts a real sense of worth to your wares.

It's disproportionately wordy in some places and maddeningly scant in others – more space is given to chatty NPCs than tutorials – but the purposeful busywork on offer here is the sort of thing that makes you wonder why we even bother trying to save the world when we could just get rich selling vendor trash instead. ■

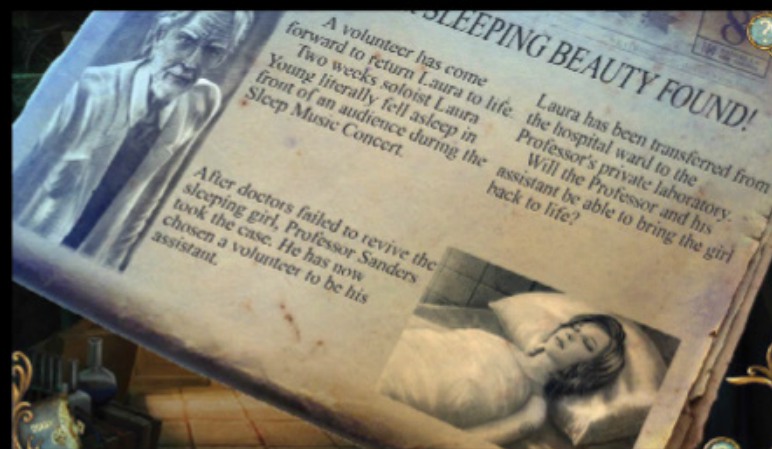
83



NIGHT IN THE WOODS

There's a lesson to be learned from *Night in the Woods*: if you ever want to deal with big subjects such as mental health and relationships without putting people on edge, try being a cartoon cat. It's much easier to deal with thorny subjects when people are distracted by your whiskers. It also helps that *Night in the Woods* is actually funny, like an *Animal Crossing* slacker movie made by Kevin Smith at the peak of his powers. The best moments are small and celebratory, when protagonist Mae is hanging out with her weird friends in the cosily autumnal Possum Springs. A deft commentary on life's complexities in a disarmingly adorable package. ■

80



DREAMSCAPES: THE SANDMAN

We'll finish with a game that has two references to sleeping in the title. *Dreamscapes* is a pleasantly innocuous point-and-click adventure, and the same art style as every other hidden object game – every screen looks like promotional artwork for your aunt's crystal healing business. You have to go into the clown-filled dreams of a concert violinist to help rebuild the magic dreamcatcher that protects her from an evil Sandman, which is every bit as weird as it sounds. ■

65

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN



URGENT APPEAL



Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian crisis for the Ukrainian people; it's a child protection emergency.

Up to 100,000 children warehoused in Ukraine's vast orphanage system – a network of over 700 buildings – risk being forgotten. Left to face the dangers of war alone as staff flee. As families are torn apart or forced from their homes, many more children are at risk of being separated from the love and protection they desperately need. Worse still, they are at risk of trafficking, or being placed in overcrowded, understaffed and poorly resourced orphanages in border countries.

We must act now.

Born out of the Balkans conflict 30 years ago, we've championed the vital importance of family and community-based care of children and our teams are on the ground in Ukraine, Moldova and Romania to ensure this war does not rob children of the love and protection they need now more than ever. Across all three countries, we're directly supporting displaced families and unaccompanied children with material

and emotional support. We're working closely with authorities to keep families together when they are at their most vulnerable and to fight for the safe tracking, monitoring and care for children without parental care. And we won't stop when the fighting stops.

Will you help us by donating?

With your help, we can avert a child protection crisis of epic proportions and ensure children are protected and kept in families. Never orphanages.

To help protect vulnerable children, donate online at: **www.hopeandhomes.org/donate**. Or call **01722 790 111** Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm.

Please quote **FP22 - G&E** when making your donation.

In the event that funds raised exceed what is needed to deliver Hope and Homes for Children immediate and longer-term response to this crisis, we will use donations where the need is greatest.

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN



I would like to make a donation to Hope and Homes for Children:

Name	Address
Tel	Email

I enclose a cheque for £ made payable to Hope and Homes for Children or please debit £

from my credit/debit card (details below)

I would like to donate by debit/credit card

☐ Visa	☐ Mastercard	☐ Maestro	☐ CAF card
Card no.			
Start date	Expiry date	Issue no.	Security no.
Signature		Date	

giftaid it

Make your gift grow by 25% at no extra cost to you

☐ I want to Gift Aid my donation and any donations I make in the future or have made in the past 4 years to Hope and Homes for Children. I am a UK taxpayer and understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference. Gift Aid will be used to fund Hope and Homes for Children's general work.

Name of taxpayer	Today's date
------------------	--------------

Please let us know if you would like to hear from us:

☐ by phone ☐ by email
☐ please tick here if you would NOT like to hear from us by post.

Please make cheques payable to 'Hope and Homes for Children' and send to Hope and Homes for Children, FREEPOST RTKX-TYLS-JHHB, East Clyffe Farm Barn, Salisbury Road, Steeple Langford, Salisbury SP3 4BF.

You can view our privacy policy here www.hopeandhomes.org/privacy.

Registered charity (No. 1089490) FP22 - G&E

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



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GROUP TEST

Tiny cases for putting together powerful mini-builds.

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Don't let PC gaming push your energy bills to new heights.

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TECH TALES

Looking back on the rise and fall of overclocking your PC.

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BUYER'S GUIDE

Find the right build for your budget with our expert guide.



GROUP TEST

SMALL FORM FACTOR PC CASES

We've jammed the tiniest components into the best small form factor PC cases around. *By Dave James*

The traditional image of a gaming PC is some hulking monster of a machine, dominating your desktop like some great colossus. But there is something innately satisfying about squeezing the same amount of gaming power into a pint-sized system. And I can't help but adore those mini-ITX motherboards; the thought of all that PC power held on an upturned palm. Glorious stuff for nerds like me.

Once upon a time, small form factor builds meant making sometimes severe compromises on the parts you used, but the latest micro machines can house the sort of components that would make a workstation blush. These systems can house full size, triple-slot graphics cards, and some come with the power supplies and cooling to make the most of those and the high-performance processors you might want to strap to them.





H1 v2

NZXT £340

A stellar chassis upgrade forged in fire

1 I was a big fan of the original NZXT H1 mini-ITX chassis when it first came out. But then, mine never caught fire. Which is a good thing because I've been using it as the basis for my office work machine ever since. Robin would not have been pleased if I'd burned down the PC Gamer offices because of its faulty PCIe riser cable. Aside from the specific riser problem, the H1 was a fantastic package to build a wee PC into. And so is this recently updated version, too. On the face of it, the second version looks identical, but NZXT has actually done a lot

to improve the overall design, from extra GPU space, more USBs and helpful build guidance. The real beauty of the H1 is that it includes both a powerful PSU and a liquid CPU cooler, so the really awkward bits of a mini-ITX build are taken care of. And it's a genuine joy to build into, in a way which other mini-ITX cases generally aren't. Even the HYTE Revolt 3, which almost apes the H1, is a far more fiddly place in which to build a rig.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great to build into
- Extra cooling
- Routed cabling is a blessing

SPECS MOTHERBOARD SUPPORT: MINI-ITX / **DIMENSIONS:** 405 X 196 X 196 MM / **WEIGHT:** 7.6 KG / **GPU CLEARANCE:** 324 X 58 MM / **PSU:** 750W SFX 80 / **COOLING:** 140 MM AIO COOLER, 92 MM REAR FAN / **RISER CABLE:** PCIe 4.0 X16

H210i

NZXT £109

Affordable function and NZXT style

2 The NZXT H210i is essentially a tiny version of our favourite mid-tower, the H710i. Built to only support mini-ITX builds, the H210i still does a great job fitting a high-end system into a compact, minimalistic package. That does mean it still looks like a mid-tower, but also that it will be able to take full size components when it comes to everything else. It's only the motherboard that needs to be of a diminutive stature. Where that is most keenly felt is in your choice of full ATX PSU and the cable routing of said power brick. This chassis gives you a lot of space to build

into and a lot of space for your high-performance rig to breathe. It's also worth stating that the NZXT H210 (no-I) is identical, except that you don't get the RGB strip and fan controller support. But given that makes it a more reasonable \$70 I think I'd happily forgo those more extraneous luxuries if I'm building my own mini-ITX gaming machine. The actual build process remains the same, and you can still build just as powerful a PC inside it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great cooling support
- Integrated RGB LED strip
- CAM isn't everyone's favourite

SPECS MOTHERBOARD SUPPORT: MINI-ITX / **DIMENSIONS:** 210 X 349 X 372 MM / **WEIGHT:** 5.9 KG / **GPU CLEARANCE:** 25 X 44 MM / **PSU:** ATX SUPPORT / **COOLING:** 2X 120MM FANS / **RISER CABLE:** N/A

GROUP TEST



3

Evolv Shift XT

PHANTEKS £160

A mini-ITX chassis that grows with your build

3 In a world where mini-ITX gaming chassis aren't that mini, the Phanteks Evolv Shift XT can deliver a pint-sized gaming PC that can perform. But it's also a tiny chassis that can literally grow with your PC, and that's a definite bonus. Because, while the actual build process remains simple, it's definitely not fun. This is a regular issue with mini-ITX machines; the cramped confines of the case inevitably makes for an awkward building experience most times.

The smart thing about this wee case is that it can evol(e), depending on how much cooling you desire. With three different

size profiles, the Evolv Shift XT allows you to have either a super-compact system, something with a little more cooling, or a system that can pack in a 240mm AIO CPU cooler without compromising on scale.

All you actually need do to change the size is move two standoffs between three different points on the roof of the case, and screw in or remove the relevant backplates to prop it up. It's delightfully simple.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Can go really small
- But can also offer extra cooling space
- Will house big boi GPUs

SPECS MOTHERBOARD SUPPORT: MINI-ITX / **DIMENSIONS:** 371 X 173 X 211 - 272 MM / **WEIGHT:** 4.2 KG / **GPU CLEARANCE:** 324 X 62 MM / **PSU:** SUPPORTS SFX & SFX-L / **COOLING:** NONE / **RISER CABLE:** PCIe 4.0 X16

Crystal 280X RGB

CORSAIR £160

An oldie, but an absolute gem

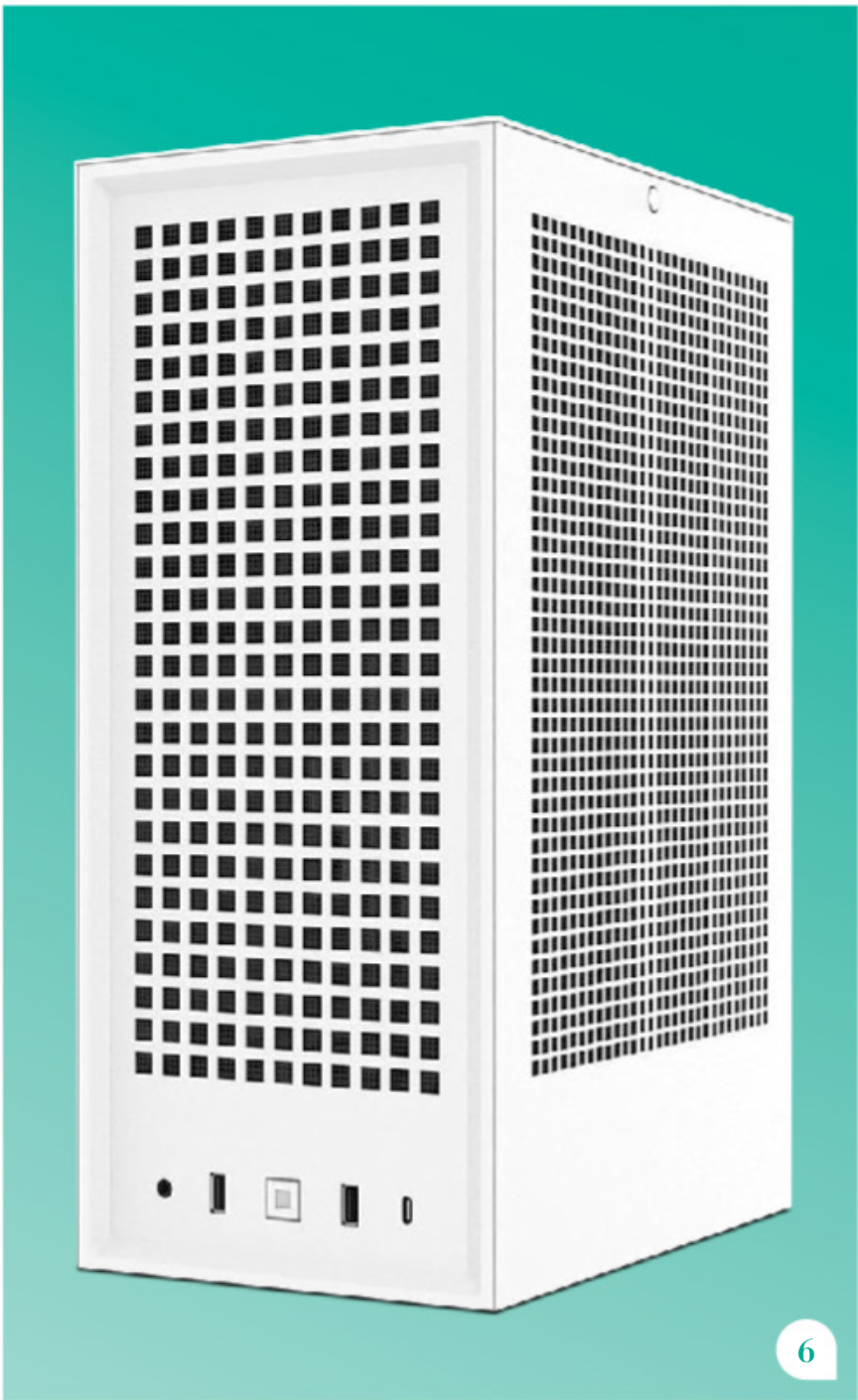
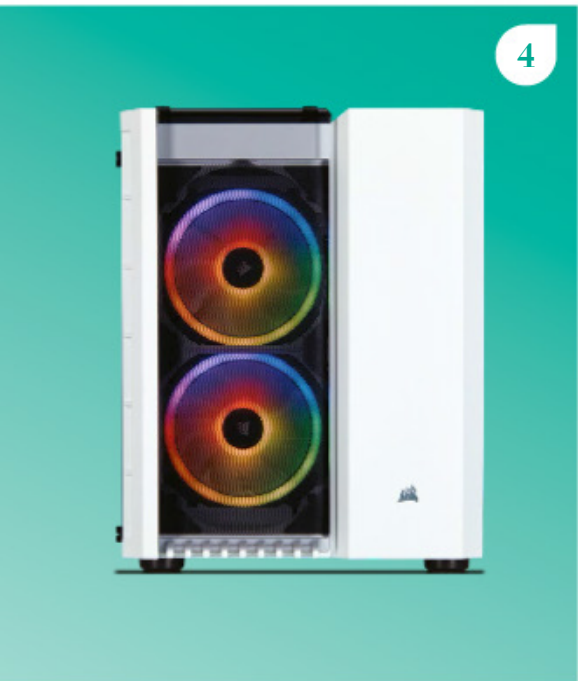
4 The Crystal 280X is the largest of the cases on offer here, and that's because it will not only cater for mini-ITX motherboards, but can also support the larger Micro ATX specification, too. It's still an impressively compact case, but means you get a huge amount of support for full-size components and those more feature-rich mATX mobos. The dual-chamber design works a treat in the 280X, allowing you to show off the core components to their fullest, while hiding your mess of cable management on the opposite side with a host of storage bays and your PSU.

In these days of ever expanding graphics cards, the only real issue is that there's actually less room for a big GPU in this chassis than in many of the smaller, dedicated mini-ITX cases. With a hard limit of 300mm in terms of graphics card length, despite the potential for it to expand over four slots, there will be many a GPU which simply won't fit inside the Corsair case. But I love the design and the ease of building into it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Versatile interior layout
- Pre-installed addressable RGB fans
- Spacious dual chamber design

SPECS MOTHERBOARD SUPPORT: MINI-ITX AND MICRO-ATX / **DIMENSIONS:** 398 X 27 X 351 MM / **WEIGHT:** 7.24 KG / **GPU CLEARANCE:** 300 MM / **PSU:** SUPPORTS ATX / **COOLING:** 2X 120MM RGB FANS / **RISER CABLE:** N/A



ALL RISE?

In order to pack the most powerful graphics cards around into your small form factor build, it might be necessary to shift exactly where those are installed. Normally you'd plumb your GPU directly into the primary PCIe slot on your motherboard, but if that doesn't make sense given the orientation of the chassis in question, then you may need to use a riser cable.

It's worth making sure that the cable matches the required bandwidth of your GPU or you might hobble performance. A PCIe 4.0 x16 graphics card, for example, will only operate at half the bandwidth using a PCIe 3.0 x16 riser cable. For most cards that limit won't be an issue – there's ample bandwidth already – but if you have a low-end card with a PCIe x8 connection, such as the RX 6500 XT you'd get a quarter of the bandwidth.

Z5i
G.SKILL £308

The DeLorean of micro chassis

I love a swinging tempered glass side panel. And when you throw me a mini-ITX chassis that has two of them, hinged on either side of the vertical mounting spine of the case, well... I get a little excited. Add some underslung RGB lighting, like some drift-happy modded sports car, and you've got the G.Skill Z5i.

But the Z5i isn't small. In fact, it's actually larger in stature than the H1 V2, but it comes with a still relatively sleek design. It's definitely worth adjusting the underslung RGB, as the rainbow 'G.Skill' logo really sucks the cool out of the case more efficiently

than the 280mm radiator I had installed in the back of the case. There are effectively three compartments in the G.Skill chassis. On one side is the motherboard and PSU, on the other side is the GPU bay, and at the rear is enough space to drop in a large radiator for an AIO CPU cooling loop. That makes building into the Z5i straightforward, especially as the swinging doors can easily be lifted from their hinges to be entirely removed.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Easy access via hinged doors
- Space for large AIO coolers
- Tight around PSU cables

SPECS MOTHERBOARD SUPPORT: MINI-ITX AND MICRO-ATX / DIMENSIONS: 307.5 X 190 X 417.5MM / WEIGHT: 5.8 KG / GPU CLEARANCE: 330 MM / PSU: SUPPORTS SFX & SFX-L / COOLING: NONE / RISER CABLE: PCIe 3.0 X16

Revolt 3
HYTE £199

Cheese grater looks, quality design

I'm still not 100% sold on the look of the Revolt 3, but I have no doubt this is an excellent modern chassis to build your next Mini-ITX PC into, with support for a wide range of components, and no riser cable to worry about.

The Revolt 3 is incredibly similar to the H1, but has marked differences where the two companies have gone in different directions with internal design choices. The lack of riser cable is one, though that doesn't mean you're really any more restricted in terms of your GPU choice. It still houses everything in more or less the same overall footprint.

One other benefit of this is that you can squeeze an entire 280mm AIO liquid CPU cooler into the build. Any off the peg chiller with a radiator under 35mm thick will fit, and you won't run into the same memory height restrictions the H1 has. As a barebones chassis it comes in at a very reasonable \$130, but when you factor in the routed 700W PSU that leaps to \$250, though that is the price of high-capacity mini PSUs.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- With 700W PSU cabling is routed
- No GPU riser cable to worry about
- Will take a 280mm AIO

SPECS MOTHERBOARD SUPPORT: MINI-ITX / DIMENSIONS: 409 X 253 X 178 MM / WEIGHT: 6.3 KG (INC. PSU) / GPU CLEARANCE: 335 X 58 MM / PSU: 700W SFX 80 PLUS GOLD (OPTIONAL) / COOLING: NONE / RISER CABLE: N/A



Maybe skip the Vegas-style light show from your setup this year.

POWER STRUGGLE

What can we do to make our PCs kinder on our **ENERGY BILLS**?

As it turns out, we've been burning quite a lot of gas to make electricity. About 29% of our gas is used for generating it here in the UK. Also, 3% of all the gas we consume here comes from Russia, and since Russia invaded Ukraine that supply line's been compromised. That happened during a period of soaring wholesale costs for energy sources created by sudden post-pandemic demand, and as a result it now costs about £10,000 to boil a kettle.

We just have to laugh, otherwise we'd cry. The cost of living crisis is real, and let's not be so flippant as to suggest that running a gaming PC is among the chief concerns it creates, but let's also keep in mind that PC gamers are a broad group with varied financial backgrounds. In fact the only thing we all have in common in that regard is that we'd prefer to pay less for our expanding energy bills.

WATTS UP

These events have prompted many of us to seriously consider how much energy our gaming devices actually consume, perhaps for the first time. Before bills started skyrocketing in early 2022 onwards, you could use an average energy unit cost of 12.5 p/kWh to ballpark estimate your gaming PC's usage. Most PCs use 100-200W

depending on their specs, so that would have cost you between 10p-20p per day.

Now the average energy unit cost is somewhere around 28 p/kWh, so you can go ahead and double that figure now. And then tack on another 40% if electric bills increase by as much as the news media is telling us they could this winter.

What can we do? Quite a lot, actually. Because we generally don't think about wattage until it's time to overvolt something, power an absurd new GPU with seven power connectors, or buy a new PSU – the least exciting upgrade possible – the marginal gains we can employ to reduce overall energy consumption and increase efficiency aren't necessarily at the forefront of our minds. Let us all channel our inner Martin Lewis and get our PCs looking after the pennies.

TURN IT OFF

Let's start with the obvious: turning your PC off, as in actually shutting it down instead of leaving it on sleep mode. This isn't going to transform the complexion of your energy bills and save you tens of pounds, since PCs generally use about 3W per hour in sleep mode (versus 100W in an active state), but it's so easy to do. And what's the downside? Marginally slower boot times? You can absorb that inconvenience, Sammy Stopwatch.

Sleep mode does still have a part to play in helping out your energy bills though – by kicking in sooner after



What about crypto mining?

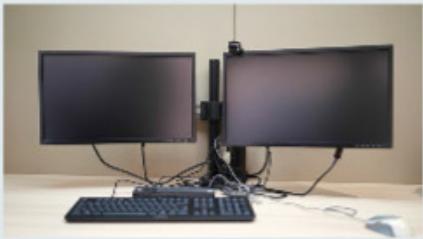
In 2021, Bitcoin miners used as much electricity as the state of Washington. It's a massively electric-hungry endeavour, and soaring energy bills have ruined the profitability of crypto farms. That means once the semiconductor shortage ends, GPU prices may once again approach affordability.



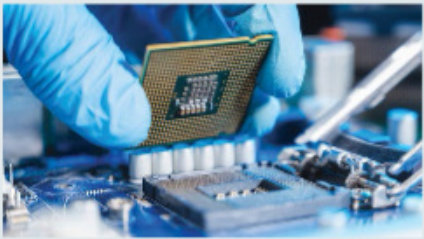
FAR LEFT: And the difference? The winner used Windows 10's 'high performance' power preset.

LEFT: Pictured: how electricity is made for UK power lines, apparently.

THE OLD BILL *Four energy-hungry extravagances you can live without*



DUAL MONITOR SETUPS
Nothing's that urgent on that Chrome tab with your favourite subreddit open on it, so shut one down.



OVERCLOCKED CPUs/GPUs
Let's be honest with ourselves for a minute – it's doing nothing for gaming performance, is it?



MAX MONITOR BRIGHTNESS
Do your retinas and your current account a favour and turn the brightness down below 50%.



RGB
Its power consumption is small – about 3W per strip – but if you have a lot of lit peripherals, consider a blackout.

inactivity. In Windows 10's 'Power & Sleep' settings menu you can tell sleep mode to kick in sooner – say, after five minutes of inactivity instead of 20. Beats leaving your PC primed to run *Crysis* in seven different windows at a moment's notice while you pop away for a tea.

Also in Windows power settings, you can choose a power plan. Even though it seems to go against every tenet of our existence as PC gamers, it really is fine to select 'balanced' instead of 'high performance'. The former won't affect your in-game performance at all. It'll just power down your CPU into a lower power state when it's not being used, then throttle it back up when Windows detects that an app or apps are placing demands on it again. It's not so different from Sleep Mode kicking in, except it happens much more dynamically without your noticing, and much sooner than Sleep Mode would begin.

CULL THE APPS

While you're still reeling from the idea of not clicking the option that features the words 'high' and 'performance' from a drop-down menu, consider this: those annoying startup apps you never wanted to greet you every time you boot to Windows are costing you system resources, and by extension, a small amount of energy bill money. That's right, EA Origin. You knew this day would come.

It's time to disable all the startup apps you don't actually use or need. You can find the Startup tab in your Task Manager in Windows. For too long have we lived under Adobe Updater's cruel tyranny. Now we liberate ourselves, and spend energy bill money only on the programs we

deliberately use, not the creepy ones in the background. Making these marginal gains at software level will help, but it probably won't be the difference between your energy bills being affordable or crippling. Hardware, on the other hand, makes a huge difference. Fortunately, the world of PC componentry's been making a real push towards energy efficiency for years anyway, quite independently of our current predicament, and that means you can shop around for some really low output parts.

The most important of all, though, is your power supply.

Yes, that again. PSUs with higher 80 Plus energy efficiency ratings are not only more efficient under higher loads, but produce much less heat as a result, and that requires the fans on your PC to kick in less frequently and at lower speeds. So if you want lower bills in the long run, making an initial outlay on an 80 Plus Titanium or Platinum-rated PSU will keep your whole PC cooler and ask

less of your fans and liquid cooling.

RENEWABLES

We don't know what energy prices will do over the next few years. But what we do know is that making your PC more energy efficient isn't just good for your finances, but for the environment. Using less electricity means burning less gas and coal to produce it – at least until renewables tip over into becoming our primary electrical fuel source, and hopefully that will be soon. So we've got an opportunity as PC gamers not just to save money, but to be a bit kinder to the planet by making these changes. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

IN WINDOWS POWER SETTINGS, YOU CAN CHOOSE A POWER PLAN

HOT TOPIC

The rise and fall of **OVERCLOCKING** in mainstream PC gaming

It was once a hidden gateway to magically higher framerates. Overclocking seemed an arcane art previously, a mystical set of inputs in a scary command window that conjured up extra performance where there had been none. The screws stayed tight on your PC case, nothing changed inside it. And yet here was Geoff Crammond's *Grand Prix 3*, bold as brass, running at 30fps now instead of 24.

Overclocking culture's changed though, hasn't it? Its modern incarnation feels something more like political astroturfing, the disguising of a corporate-sponsored message as a grassroots campaign. There's very little point in fiddling with voltages, clock speeds and the like now, but manufacturers are leaning on it harder than ever as a selling point, and, ironically, making it far easier than ever before to achieve. So what happened between the days of those arcane rituals that unlocked tangibly better performance, and the arbitrary number-hunting of today?

It probably has something to do with the speed and breadth of information dissemination. When PC cases were beige, the expertise you needed in order to overclock a CPU or a graphics card could be obtained in one of three ways: a computer science degree that gave you a technical understanding of PCBs sufficient to grasp what all the values in your BIOS actually referred to, articles in gaming magazines written by people with such qualifications, or superhuman patience, many lost afternoons, and a trial and error approach. As such, overclocking existed only on the fringes of gaming culture throughout the '90s and much of the '00s. A few dedicated enthusiasts knew how to wring a bit of extra performance from their systems, and manufacturers were largely happy with that. Well – at least ambivalent.

CLOCK STARS

And you couldn't make apples to oranges comparisons, either, which made following guides in gaming mags tricky. Not only was there significant variance in how much overclocking potential lay in different specimens of the same model of CPU, there were also totally difference clockspeed ranges, voltages, and BIOS menus between different models and manufacturers. Unless the guide you were following was written specifically about your 350MHz Pentium II, there was little wisdom to be gleaned from it.

Then CPU clockspeeds started accelerating rapidly, and multi-core models hit the market. It was at this point that the overclocking community, previously banished to live under rocks with only CMOS bleeps to converse with, popped out into the daylight to inform us all that the Core 2 Q6600 we just bought could very easily run at an extra 1GHz clockspeed. And that would make it

perform better than Intel chips twice the price.

Since we all had decent internet connections by now, that news travelled fast. And it was relatively easy to do, too. The BIOS menus circa 2007 weren't the friendliest places, but overclocking the Q6600's core clockspeed was really just changing the numbers in one box and saving your changes.

Crucially, doing so gave you dramatic changes in performance in games. It wasn't just the abstract satisfaction of knowing there was a higher spec to your PC now – *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl* was running at a playable frame rate now without you spending any more money on it, and that was fantastic. Thank you, overclocking. Who needs hardware upgrades?

TEMP AGENCY

Hardware manufacturers, that's who. So when they saw that we were running out of their proverbial bank vaults with handfuls of free performance, that presented a bit of an issue for their sales targets. By the 2010s, Intel had introduced chip

CPU CLOCK SPEEDS STARTED ACCELERATING RAPIDLY



PHIL IWANIK

His current PC runs proudly and defiantly at manufacturer specs. Left a trail of broken GPUs behind him at PC Format. Legend has it that's what killed the mag.

TIMING *Four reasons overclocking isn't worth it in 2022*



DYNAMIC THROTTLING

Modern CPUs and GPUs throttle up and down depending on their usage. That makes for moving goalposts when you're fiddling with values, and results in questionable returns.



GAMES HATE IT

You might technically have a higher GPU clockspeed after overclocking, but once a game heats it up to a certain temp, performance will tank and the card will throttle down to cool off.



HARDWARE PAYWALLS

An extra £30-£40 for the privilege of a 'K' chip with an unlocked multiplier? Yeah, no. We're alright actually, Intel. We'll buy another RGB strip light instead.



EXPENSIVE REPLACEMENTS

Deliberately overvolting semiconductors during the great semiconductor shortage, for minimal in-game performance gains? Yeah, that's not the best idea with the cost of living crisis.



models with locked and unlocked core clockspeed multipliers, the latter denoted with a K and sold at a premium. The culture of overclocking was starting to change from a homebrew operation with underground origins to a corporate endorsed, and corporate controlled, upsell.

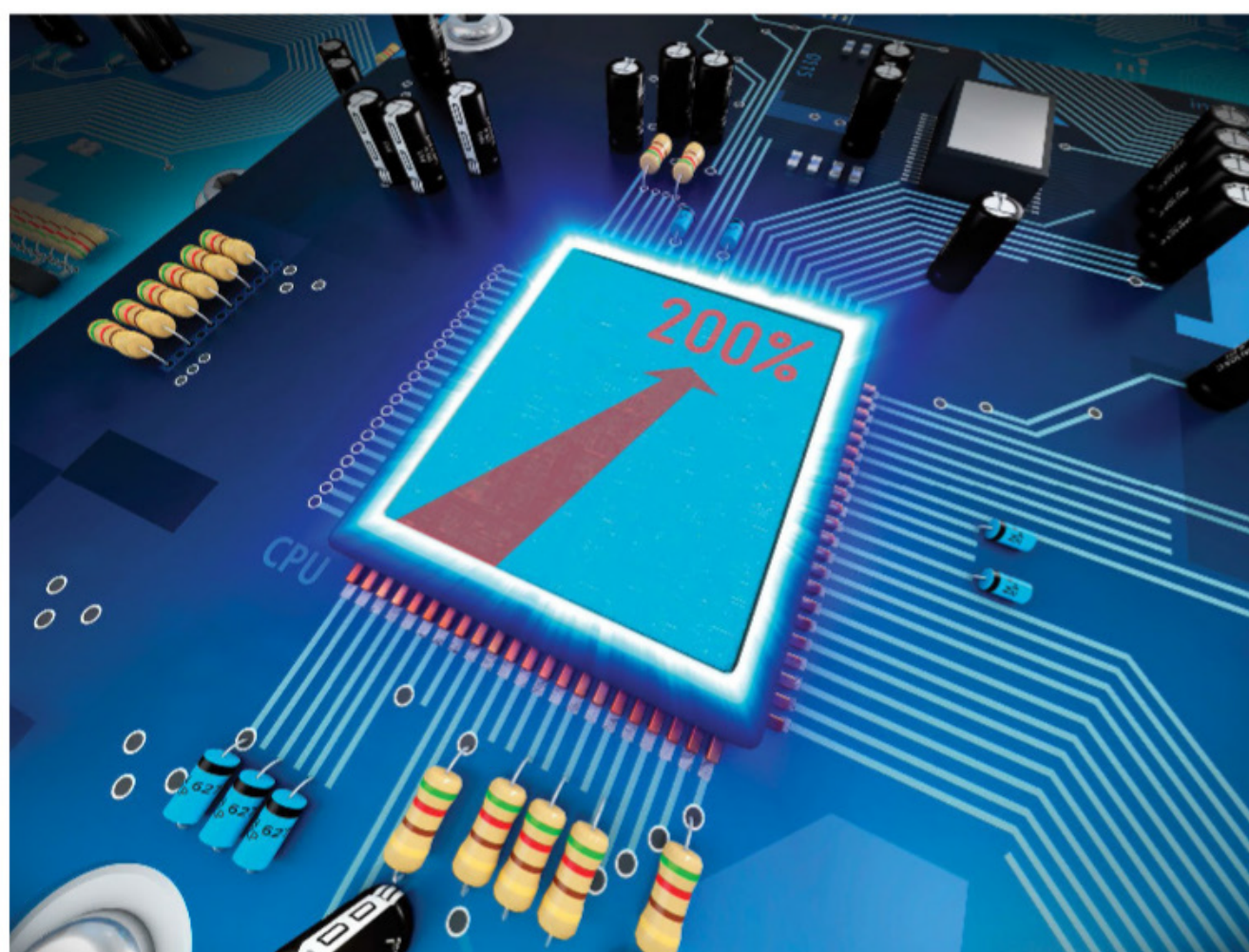
But something else happened at the same time. Die designers were finding performance gains not by pushing clockspeeds ever higher, as had always been the way until then, but by introducing multiple cores on the same chip and making them smart enough to power up or down depending on usage.

Fast forward a decade or two, and overclocking's an academic activity. The people most interested in it seem to be cooling brands, and the results aren't better in-game performance but benchmark numbers achieved by spending money on liquid nitrogen bits and bobs. And that's a shame, because over time, overclocking has become the opposite of what it was – once a way for gamers to improve their games without spending money, it's now a way for brands to pad their specs by encouraging you to spend loads of it. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: "So if we UNDERvolt it, we'll divert more power to the graphics card, and..."

BELOW: Modern overclocking's more about pushing arbitrary numbers up than aiding in-game fps.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£948

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £115 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 12400F Intel £170 There's no iGPU on this chip but it's a little cheaper as a result, and will work great for this particular build.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3050 Nvidia £239 This GPU will deliver 1080p performance easily, and with 8GB of memory it's built to last.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £0 There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU will work just fine.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-2400 Corsair £39 You could bump this to 16GB, but to save as much as possible we'll stick to 8GB.
POWER SUPPLY		CV Series 550W Corsair £39 You could likely make do with less wattage, but Nvidia recommends a 550W PSU for the RTX 3050, so let's be safe.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,665

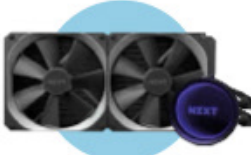
MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £180 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 12400 Intel £170 Intel's 11th Gen was at its best on a budget, and that's why this six-core/12-thread processor is a great fit for this build.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £30 Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 12th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		A80 1TB Silicon Power £98 Silicon Power has delivered a high capacity, affordable SSD and has comes with some serious storage speed.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE	 NEW ENTRY	H7 NZXT £120 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY	 NEW ENTRY	S2722DGM Dell £260 With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£4,971

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z690 Carbon WiFi MSI £410 This MSI motherboard offers a mix of high-end features, plentiful ports, and DDR5 support, without an extreme price tag.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 12900K Intel £599 Intel's Core i9 12900K represents Alder Lake's finest chip, and it's one hell of a processor for whatever you might throw at it.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £1,199 The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB G.Skill £421 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN850 1TB Western Digital £120 Though technically this platform support PCIe 5.0, for now we're sticking with WD's PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		5000D Corsair £155 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		34 QD-OLED (AW3423DW) Alienware £1,099 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“It’s like I’m a bullet propelling a long gun into the chests of my enemies”

Did **CHIVALRY 2**’s horse update or Steam release bring me back?

Chivalry 2 released a year ago on the Epic Games Store, but now it’s on Steam, so my friends might actually play it with me. Hurrah! For their patience, they’ll avoid some of the multiplayer medieval warfare game’s early server issues and bugs, and start with several more maps than there were at launch. Most importantly, though: there are horses now, and with horses comes jousting, and jousting is good.

I’m not sure I’ve ever done first-person jousting in a game until now, unless you count ramming horses into each other in *Red Dead Online* to watch four player bodies and two horse bodies ragdoll into a stream. There’s an early arcade game called *Joust* that involves flying ostriches, but otherwise, there tragically aren’t

TYLER WILDE



THIS MONTH
Reenacted the last duel from *The Last Duel*.

ALSO PLAYED
Old World

that many games about knocking opponents off of mounts.

I imagine that’s probably just because it’s hard. *Chivalry 2* isn’t as rickety as *Red Dead Online*, but it also sometimes forgets whether or not past events influence future ones. Sometimes a horse will lose limb control and glide a few feet like one of those plastic model horses my sister collected, or get a bit teleporty. I wish it were a little tighter, but if I were developer Torn Banner, I’d probably tell me to see if I can accurately predict the location of a

TOP: A man who is about to be jousted.

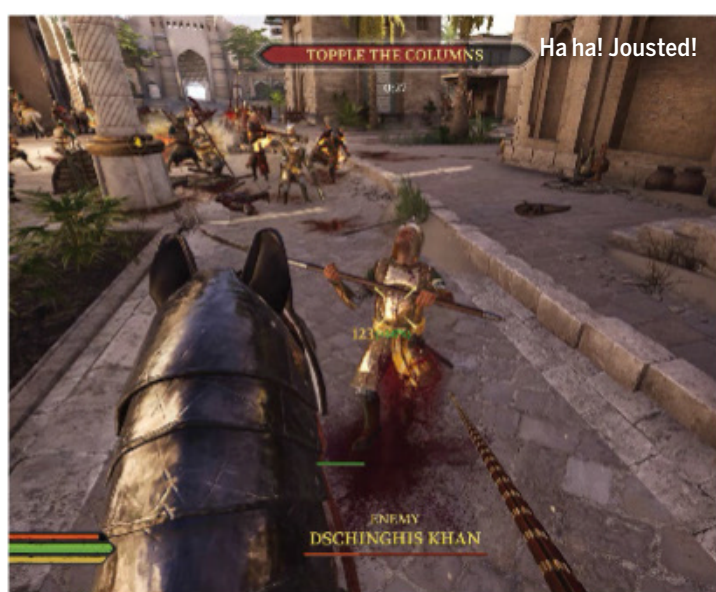
warhorse in a 64-player city siege. I could only respond: no thank you.

I only complain because it’s so fun when it works. For an FPS player, aiming a couched lance (the fancy way to say that it’s tucked under your arm) has a funny backwards feeling: it’s like I’m a bullet propelling a long gun into the chests of my enemies. Galloping across the bow of an enemy horse while sticking my lance out to knock its rider into the dirt feels so good. I am a BattleBot.

LAUNCH BUFFET

The weird thing is that as fun as the horses are, I think I’m mostly playing

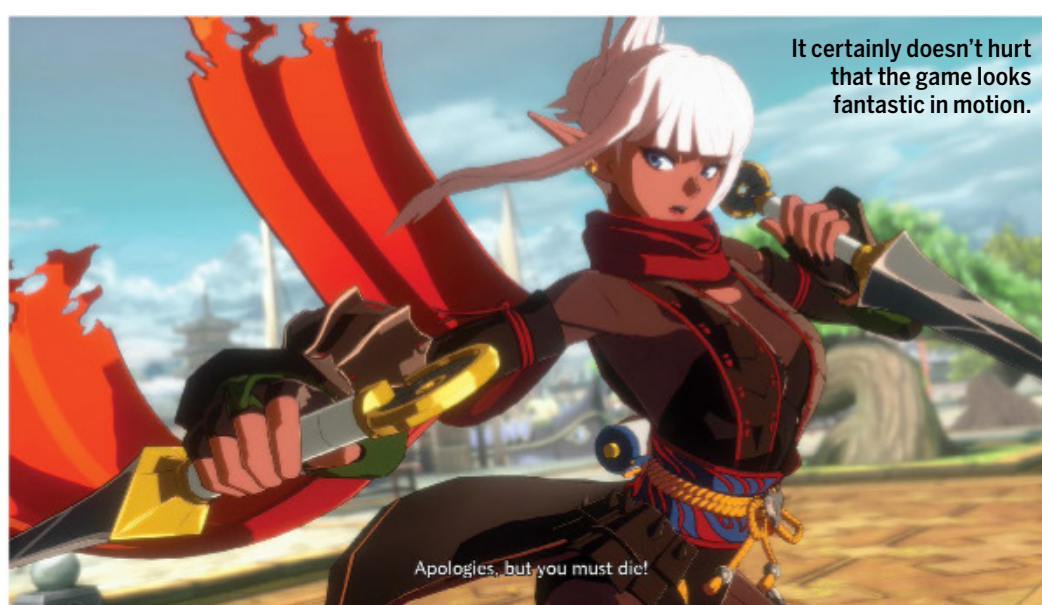
STICKING MY LANCE OUT TO KNOCK ITS RIDER INTO THE DIRT FEELS SO GOOD



Chivalry 2 again because I got a new Steam copy. Launches are fun. It's refreshing to start from scratch with just the basic classes and weapons, and even though I never really cared about my stats before, I suddenly want to achieve a more respectable K/D ratio. Second chances are alluring. Maybe I just want to know whether or not people can change? I could be an archer this time. I take it back. That's too far.

It's funny: I've got friends who refuse to use the Epic Games Store, but I've always been the 'Steam, Epic, who cares?' guy. And yet here I am, preferring *Chivalry 2* on Steam. In a completely abstract way that has nothing to do with Steam's features, it feels more at home in Gabe-land. Maybe that's because the first *Chivalry* was based on a Source mod called *Age of Chivalry*. Or maybe I just want the cheevos.

That's probably it. I'm glad Epic Games Store exclusivity announcements aren't treated like heresy trials anymore, though. It seems like PC gamers have gotten used to some games launching twice: once on the Epic Games Store without horses, and once on Steam after horses are added. (If only that were actually a rule!) ■



“Special moves are just a button press”

Is **DNF DUEL** the future of fighting games?

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Still got my arse handed to me by online players, of course.

ALSO PLAYED
Legends of Runeterra, *Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga*

I don't think *DNF Duel* is likely to gain much traction among Western fighting game fans. It's a spin-off of a game I suspect few English-speaking players have even heard of, and it hardly seemed to make a splash over here on launch. But I still think it could represent the future of fighting games.

The barriers to entry in the genre are, on the whole, enormous, and chief among them is execution. Simply performing your character's special moves and combos is often a skill requiring regular, focused practice to learn, and even someone with hundreds of hours on the clock may fluff a vital attack.

So what makes *DNF Duel* stand out is how stripped back its inputs are. Special moves are just a button press while holding in a direction; combos are generous enough that stringing together attacks is easy. Winning a match still takes smarts and reflexes, but it's hugely more accessible than the likes of *Street Fighter* or *Tekken*.

I'm reminded of a long lost game called *Rising Thunder*, which applied

a similar style to a game of battling mechs. The plan was to combine that accessibility with a free-to-play business model, hopefully creating a fighting game that could break through to a larger mainstream audience. Even just in its initial alpha build, it felt excellent in play, and thrummed with that potential. But sadly it never made it to beta.

A STORM BREWING

Why, you ask? Well, because in 2016 developer Radiant Entertainment was actually bought up by Riot, and the team went silent.

That is, until 2021, when Riot announced 'Project L', a new *League of Legends* spin-off that is – you guessed it – a fighting game with a stated mission of being easy to learn. The dream is still alive.

If anyone can make it work, it's Riot. And if they do, I think *DNF Duel* will seem starkly ahead of its time to future players – a game in 2022 that already recognised the best path forward for the genre was to blow the doors wide open and welcome in anyone who wants to string some punches together. Give it a go, and get a taste of what may be to come... ■



“It’s somewhat cathartic to disrupt a violent arrest in a videogame”

Going bark to the future in **WATCH DOGS: LEGION**

This game features acting that I can only really describe as ‘catastrophic’. One actor in particular constantly sounds like he’s using his mouth to form human words for the very first time. Despite this I’ve been quite enjoying myself. Perhaps this is partly due to my dipping into the story only occasionally, spending most of my time exploring the futuristic London Tahn.

Once the compulsory intro mission is out of the way, *Legion* presents its open world in a way that I wish *all* such games would. I can (so far as I can tell) go anywhere at all with no restrictions, apart from the fact that some areas will treat me as hostile. There doesn’t seem to be anywhere locked behind story progression, or my own personal nemesis Minimum Player Level Requirements.

Even more importantly, while there are toys and upgrades to be unlocked, I feel pretty powerful from the beginning. I can hack drones straight away, and mess with cars and automated bollards to wreak havoc. I also love the realistically futuristic

▶ LUKE KEMP



THIS MONTH
Used hypnotism mostly for good.

ALSO PLAYED
Tangle Tower,
Kentucky Route Zero

rendering of London, in that it looks and sounds about 80% as it does now.

CANINE KICK IT?

Ten years ago, I would’ve laughed off *Legion*’s depiction of a fascistic London as embarrassingly on the nose. As it is, I look at the posters demonising refugees, and the violent arrests and abuses of peaceful protesters, and I don’t see anything to laugh about. This is *today*’s London viewed through a lens that warps things only slightly. Very surprising to see this from Ubisoft to be honest, perhaps the publisher most desperate

DON’T BE FOOLED INTO THINKING THAT I PLAY THE FLAWLESS HERO HERE

to depict political subject matter as apolitical when discussing its games.

In a world where injustice floods the news, and I often feel powerless to help, it’s somewhat cathartic to disrupt a violent arrest in a videogame and set an innocent digital person free. Don’t be fooled into thinking that I play the flawless hero here, though. One time, I kick the crap out of somebody in a pub just because they beat me at darts twice in a row. On another occasion, in order to gain access to a construction site, I hypnotise a guard within to send him on a murderous rampage. One construction worker, fleeing in terror, opens the locked gate so that he can escape. Hooray, I’m in! Ends justify the means, and so on.

Abilities such as hypnotism and cargo drones available through NPC recruitment can, on occasion, essentially break the game – and that’s why they’re so fun. It’s a shame this game breaking isn’t central to the design, and it’s a shame that the political elements aren’t given more room to breathe. But, somehow, this patchwork experience makes a lovably scruffy gaming quilt. ■



FAR LEFT: This is the future of London? Thanks, I hate it.



BELOW: “...it’s called a ‘non fungible token’. What people don’t understand...”



“You’ll inevitably start asking why the client wants a sofa in their kitchen”

Hunting practical pleasures in **HOUSE FLIPPER**

After sweeping up the sawdust from the renovation of my real life home, I was left with an enthusiasm for Japanese power tools and a craving to craft something. I’m reluctant to retrain as a carpenter, so I went to where I usually go for escapist pleasures: my PC.

House Flipper looked right for scratching the itch. The renovation simulator was released in 2018 and has you taking on jobs at run-down houses until you have enough to purchase and sell your own. It’s highly simplified in most places: installing a wooden floor is as easy as dragging your mouse.

CLEANUP DETAIL

But first there’s cleaning up to do. *House Flipper*’s clients will send you to a range of houses, but they are invariably disgusting. Thankfully waving a broom lifts all manner of stains from floors, beds and counters, transforming cleaning into a frantic clicking game. Chasing completionist

KYLE HOEKSTRA



THIS MONTH
Exchanged real tools for virtual ones.

ALSO PLAYED
OlliOlli World,
Halo Infinite

thrills, I enter each house like the vanguard of a breaching team.

Later, I’m tasked with demolishing walls in a bungalow. An amusing quirk is that provided you have satisfied most objectives then you can leave the place looking like a bomb site. I can’t remember what the client asked for by the time I’m done, but I invoice for a job marked by upturned furniture, vandalised walls, and the stupidest room layouts ever.

By checking off tasks, *House Flipper* relieves you of the self-doubt

INSTALLING A WOODEN FLOOR IS AS EASY AS DRAGGING YOUR MOUSE

of a designer, but there’s only so much mileage in labouring. You’ll inevitably start asking why the client wants a sofa in their kitchen. More generally, the game doesn’t have much time for head scratching over tools or methods, the critical decisions that sort good jobs from bodge jobs. Pretty soon *House Flipper*’s relentless and mechanistic flipping leaves me wanting to flip no more. After a dozen jobs, I’m not sure I can face another one.

Then I realise the \$91K I’ve acquired through a few hours can be put towards a house of my own. I buy an A-frame building in good nick apart from the unsettling smears trailing the kitchen floor. Taking some ownership gives meaning to the addictive mundanity of masking grimy wall textures with clean paint.

What *House Flipper* gets right is that every fix is achievable from the off. Skills can be upgraded over time, but all it takes for the amateur to get to the same place is patience. But I better stop now, before someone asks why I’m cleaning virtual windows instead of real ones. ■



DESTINY 2: SEASON OF THE HAUNTED

The Light is changing, and not everyone is happy about it. *By Phil Savage*

Destiny 2 is an ongoing notebook that, over the years, has been filled in by many different hands – some with wildly diverging philosophies about where to go and what to do. You can write the next chapter, but it's harder to go back and correct what's already been written. Bungie's big project for this year of the game is to attempt to do just that – by reworking all of the Light-based elemental powers that Guardians can wield.

The Witch Queen launched with Void 3.0, which replaced the old preset subclass selections with a more customisable system based around a series of keywords – thematic representations of that element that can be augmented.

Broadly, Void 3.0 was a success – the codification of keywords like Devour, which restores health on kill, and Volatile, which causes enemies to explode, led to some powerful combinations for both survivability and damage. Despite this, there were complaints. Some Hunter players in particular felt like they were being forced to focus on the Invisibility keyword – a powerful playstyle with great endgame potential, but one that didn't always vibe with players' fantasy of the subclass.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE September 6, 2017	DEVELOPER Bungie
PUBLISHER In-house	LINK bungie.net

Now, with *Season of the Haunted*, the Solar 3.0 rework has arrived. This time it's the Warlocks who are crying.

In hindsight, Solar 3.0 was always going to be a hard pill to swallow for Warlocks. The old Solar system had unprecedented utility. Attunement of Sky was a top-tier PvP pick, full of aerial tricks that let players find new and unexpected sightlines. Attunement of Grace was the de facto choice for high-end content, with healing grenades and Well of Radiance proving an easy way to keep your party alive. And Attunement of Flame offered the power fantasy, with chained explosions and a Super that extended itself when you killed enemies.

It couldn't last. The 3.0 reworks swap the preset 'trees' for a mix-and-match system of Aspects and Fragments – equippable active and passive powers. Without cutting large swathes of the former Solar kit, Warlocks could have theoretically paired the aerial dominance of Sky with the self-extending, homing Super attack of Flame. It would have been a nightmare for PvP balance.

Bungie's solution was to remove pretty much all of Attunement of Flame's powers. The complaint, then, is the new Solar kit 'forces' players into the aerial playstyle of Sky. *Destiny 2's* most visible community spaces always react badly to nerfs. Throughout the history of the game, Bungie has often changed course and reworked systems, and in doing so inevitably rebalanced to prevent power creep. But even if it's based on sound philosophy, people don't like having their toys taken away.

I'M A WIZARD

Lean into what Warlocks can now do, though, and there are some incredible builds in Solar 3.0. Exotic



EVEN SUPPORT BUILDS, WHILE CHANGED, ARE POWERFUL

armour pieces like Starfire Protocol are proving incredible for damage, and the new melee snap animation looks cool and feels great. Even support builds, while changed, are absurdly powerful if you create the right build. But, as with Void's Hunter changes, that's little comfort to those who loved a specific playstyle that may no longer exist.

For me, a bigger problem right now is how inconsistently the new Solar keywords pair with older weapons and mods. Radiant is a new keyword that increases weapon damage. It is separate to 'empowered' – an older, similar damage buff that still exists. The same is true for Restoration – a healing over time effect. Previous systems, like the Well of Life mod, are still tied to a generic healing effect separate from the keyword version. The 3.0 reworks are at their best when the disparate parts of a build interact with each other through the new, codified keywords.

Broadly, though, *Destiny 2's* future remains positive, despite the occasional blowup from a community that doesn't see the final plan, or trust that it'll be what they want. Next season we'll have Arc 3.0, and a more complete understanding of the full power dynamic. And if the community is unhappy with that, then we'll just have to wait for the next set of revisions. None of this is written in permanent ink. ■

NEW DAWN *Build into incredible Solar damage*



CALUS MINI-TOOL

Type: Weapon

Specifically you want a version of this SMG with the Incandescent perk. This means when you kill an enemy, it spreads the Scorch burn effect to nearby foes.



DAWN CHORUS

Type: Armour

Now that we have a way to apply Scorch, let's increase the damage. This Exotic makes Scorch hit harder, and also restores melee energy with each Scorch tick. This is good because...



EMBER OF TORCHES

Type: Fragment

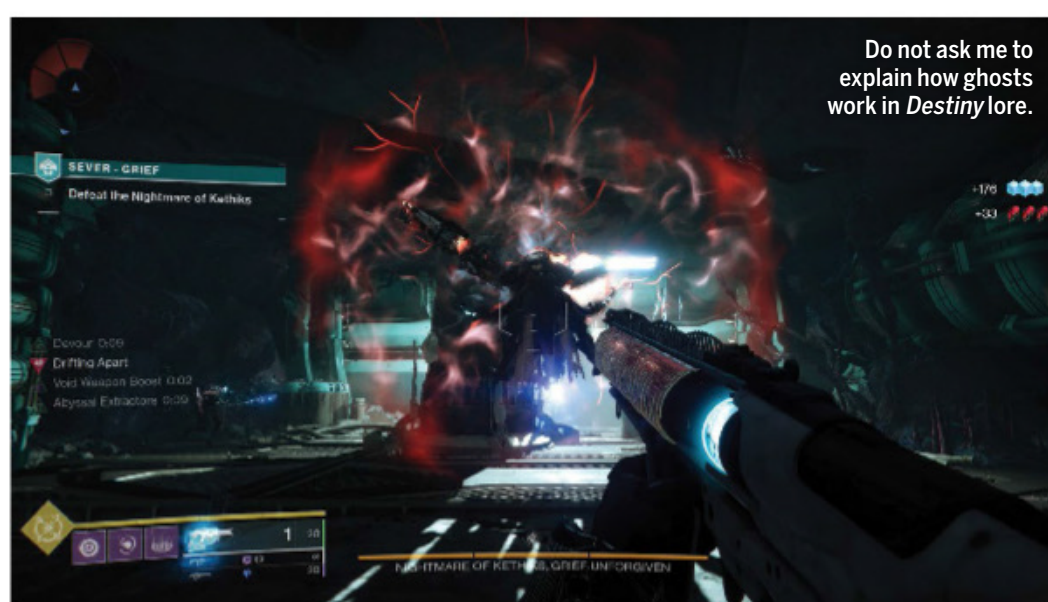
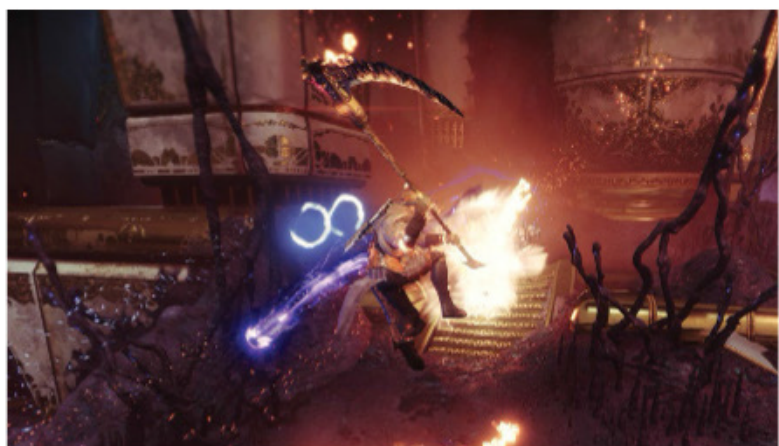
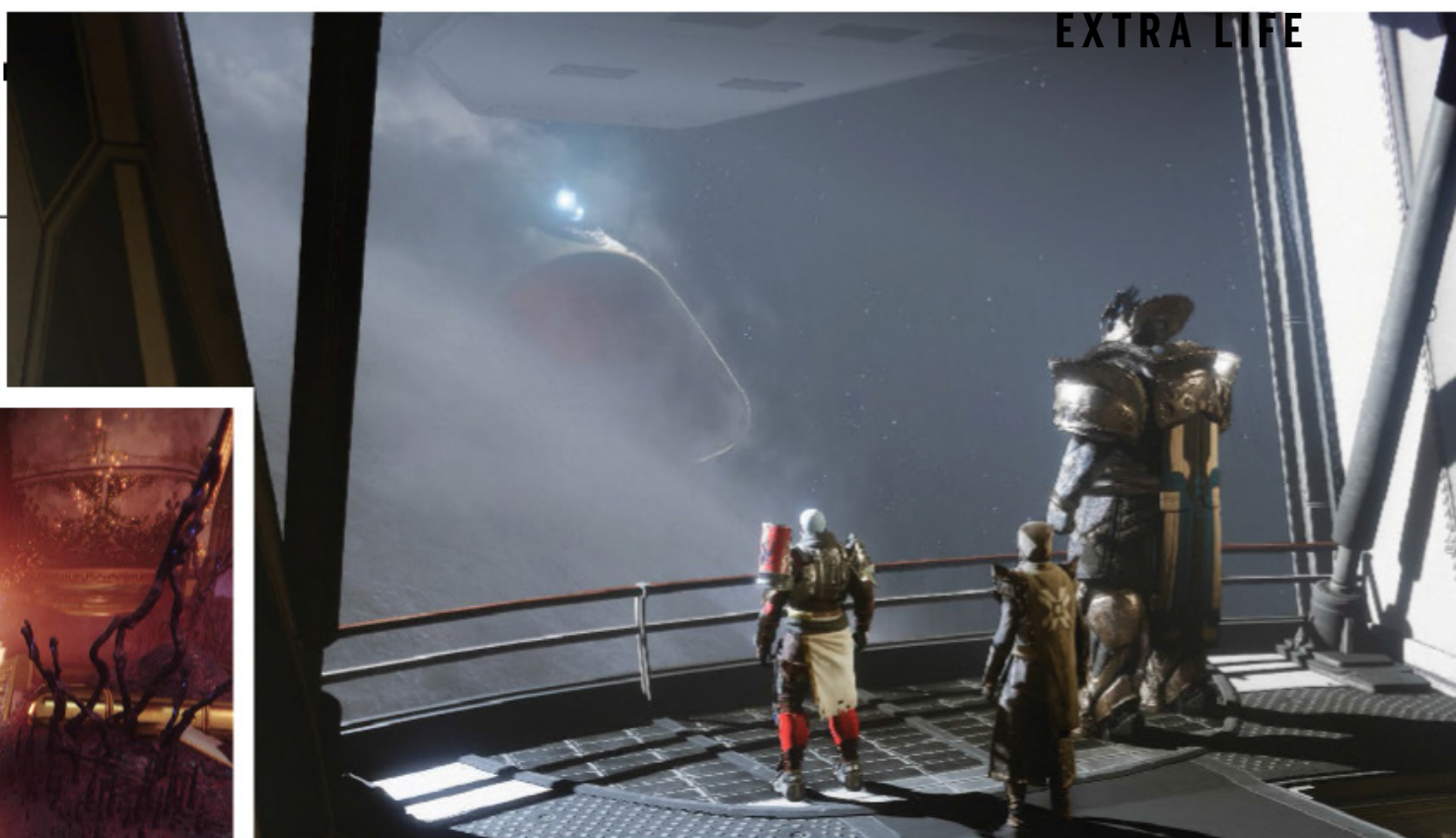
This subclass perk triggers the Radiant effect when you hit enemies with your charged melee. Radiant increases weapon damage, including the Scorch from Calus Mini-Tool.



FONT OF MIGHT

Type: Mod

Because Scorch is a Solar effect, Well mods can increase the damage. Font of Might increases Solar damage when picking up Solar Wells. This stacks with Radiant.

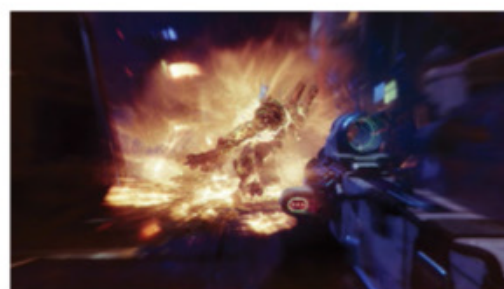


Do not ask me to explain how ghosts work in *Destiny* lore.



ABOVE: The Leviathan is back. And haunted!

BELOW: The new Warlock finger snap is cool as hell.





Raven Creek gives you an expansive new playground.



TOP: Only bring the absolute essentials.



A cure for the zombie infection doesn't mean you're safe.



PROJECT ZOMBOID

Mods to expand the zombie sandbox. *By Chris Livingston*

Most games are polite enough to wait until you've died before telling you that you've died. *Project Zomboid* does it before you even start playing. It's not done out of cruelty. The game is just being honest with you. "These are the end times. There was no hope of survival. This is how you died." That's how the game begins because your fate is sealed, and there's no sense pretending otherwise.

Project Zomboid can be brutal, punishing, and completely unforgiving, but it is also one of the deepest and most complex open world zombie survival games ever made. But just because a game is nearly perfect doesn't mean it can't be made even better with mods, and whether you're planning on trying it for the first time or you're a veteran, there are lots of fun ways to add a bit more to your survival experience.

DOOMED

There are 20 different occupations your *Project Zomboid* character can have, from carpenter to chef to cop, with each job giving bonuses to some of your skills. But this is the zombie apocalypse, so how much is a background in fitness instruction or farming really going to help when you get rushed by mobs of the undead? Maybe you should consider a mod that adds the perfect job for the apocalypse: UAC Marine. And there's only one UAC Marine worth talking about. The *DoomGuy* mod by edy pagaza adds the most famous demon slayer in history to *Project Zomboid*, because who better to fight hell on Earth than the guy who's spent his life fighting hell on Mars?

It's more than just a cool-looking *DoomGuy* skin, too. The mod includes separate pieces of

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE November 8, 2013	DEVELOPER The Indie Stone
PUBLISHER In-house	LINK projectzomboid.com/blog

DoomGuy's armour, and a bunch of weapons from the game, like the super shotgun, plasma rifle and the Crucible sword. The guns sound and act just like they do in *Doom*, too, so you'll really feel like *DoomGuy* has returned home to mince the undead.

And while you're out carving a bloody swath through the zombie



BRUTAL, PUNISHING, AND COMPLETELY UNFORGIVING

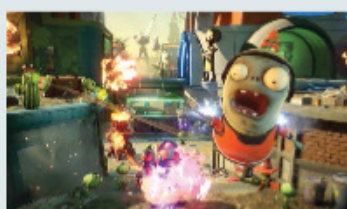
hordes, you might spot a shambling marine among them. Be sure to kill and loot your dead UAC counterparts, as there's a small chance they'll be carrying more *Doom* weapons like assault rifles and magnum pistols. The *DoomGuy* mod is still a work in progress, and there are more *Doom* tidbits to come with future updates, like *Doom Eternal*'s armour and attack animations.

GOING VIRAL

As fun as it is to kill zombies as a deadly UAC Marine, another mod is a reminder that the best offence is a good defence. The game isn't just about wasting zombies, it's about keeping yourself alive and healthy. The singularly punishing feature of *Project Zomboid* is that if you get infected with the zombie virus, there's no cure. None. If a zombie attack gets through your armour or clothing and breaks the skin, it can infect you, and if it does it's only a

ZOMB-ME

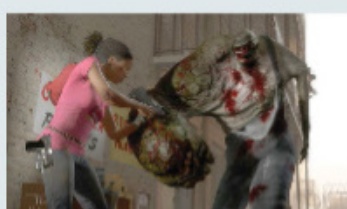
Tired of killing zombies? Try being one



PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES: GARDEN WARFARE 2
Playing co-op or against other players, you can join in the fun.



STUBBS THE ZOMBIE
He's not evil, he's just misunderstood. But he does want to eat brains and throw his head.



LEFT 4 DEAD 2
Nothing beats stopping a survivor from escaping with a perfectly timed run as a Tank.



EVIL DEAD: THE GAME
Rise from the dead to stop Ash and his little goody two-shoes friends from surviving the night.

» matter of time until the disease finishes you off. It can be heartbreaking, though realistic, to lose your character to infection thanks to a moment of carelessness.

But the *Antibodies* mod by lonegamedev gives your body a fighting chance to recover from the zombie virus. It's not a shot you take or a pill you pop to suddenly get well: you need to put in the work to keep yourself healthy. Keep your wounds and clothing clean, eat and drink, stay warm and rested, and avoid negative moods. You need to keep your body and mind in tip-top shape for your immune system to do its thing, or you can still easily succumb to the infection. *Antibodies* is a great mod because it provides a small ray of hope after you've been infected without making it feel like a simple cheat code that cures you.

And if you need some additional help keeping your character safe, warm and comfortable, it might be a good idea to get away from populated areas and into the secluded countryside. The difficulty in doing that, however, is bringing everything you need with you. You can't exactly take a camping trip during the zombie apocalypse, right?

The answer is yes, you can, with the *Autostar Trailers* mod. Getting a vehicle running is one thing, but attaching a trailer to the back and turning it to a mobile base on wheels is something else entirely. With a trailer, you can fully stock up on food in a single trip to a zombie-filled grocery store. Moving all your gear from one house to another becomes immensely easier when you can fill your trailer with tools and furniture. And being able to bring a stove and fridge with you into nature means you can keep comfortable far from the remains of civilisation. With several types of trailers to choose from, you can have all the luxuries of home like a TV and radio, a comfortable bed, generators and cooking gear, spare storage for fuel and batteries, and even a weapon rack (because let's face it, even a nice camping trip can turn bloody).

DAYTRIPPING

With mods adding new options for survival, you may also be looking for mods that add new places to survive in. There are tons of user-created maps for *Project Zomboid*, but a few of them really stand out. Fans of The

Walking Dead TV series will probably enjoy maps that include Atlanta, Alexandria, Woodbury, Rick Grimes' house, Herschel's farm, Sanctuary, Terminus, the West Georgia Correctional Facility, and other landmarks from the show. The *Walking Dead Project Map Pack* faithfully recreates those locations so you can roleplay like you're on the show, but even if you're not a dedicated viewer it's still a huge, well-designed map collection you'll enjoy. One of the mod's creators, Woldren, also has a custom multiplayer server set up if you're looking for a place to check them out.

If you're a fan of a different type of horror, maybe one a bit more Konami-flavoured, modder suffercord has created a map based on the original *Silent Hill*. It's suggested you create a server if you use it so you can crank up the fog to about 75% and lower both the rate of loot and number of zombies for a less action-packed but creepier, foreboding type of experience. While it's not an exact copy of *Silent Hill*, it definitely strikes the same mood, and features plenty of familiar locations.

If you're not looking to replicate another game or a TV show, there's still a fantastic map to visit. Raven Creek, created by modder DavidBlane, is big. It's dense. And it's not for beginners. There are three zones of difficulty as you make your

way through the map, which looks like a proper city: big buildings, megastores, major roads, apartment complexes, trailer parks, farmland, and of course lots and lots of the undead. It's a really impressively designed map with tons to explore and countless places to loot.

And if you're interested in taking the zombie action out of the United

THERE ARE TONS OF USER-CREATED MAPS FOR PROJECT ZOMBOID

States and over into Europe, I recommend the Cherbourg map by Kukrapok. At a massive 162 square kilometres, some 10,000 buildings, plus a long coastline with over a dozen islands lurking offshore, you'll have plenty of new places to loot, discover and explore. Cherbourg has a completely different feel from the vanilla maps, making it an excellent way to start a new survival campaign.

FEELING CRAFTY

Those interested in new crafting systems should try out a mod called *Desperate Crafting*, created by modder JasonB. There's nothing wild or weird about the recipes the mod adds: they're more of the 'this makes perfect sense' variety. For instance, you can now cut open canned foods with both a knife or a saw, which feels absolutely realistic. Craft a bedsheet by combining some ripped sheets, rip up fabric to create rope, use sticks to make tent pegs, combine two small hiking bags into one big one, and cobble together weapons like baseball bats and improvised knives from spare materials. It's the sort of ramshackle crafting you'd probably do in a real zombie apocalypse, and fits into *Project Zomboid* perfectly.

And if you're looking for more extensive changes, check out a mod called *HydroCraft*, which adds new plants, animals like dogs and horses, new craftable weapons including crossbows, maces, spears, swords, and so much more it'd take a few extra pages to print it all out.

You'll find all of the mods listed above in *Project Zomboid*'s Steam Workshop, and it only takes a single click to subscribe to them. ■

HOW YOU DIED

Zombies aren't the only threat to your health

BOREDOM

You're safe in your base, but bored. What relieves boredom? Leaving your base to fight zombies.

WINDOWS

Jumping out a window to flee zombies is awesome. But you forgot: you're on the second floor...

WEIGHT

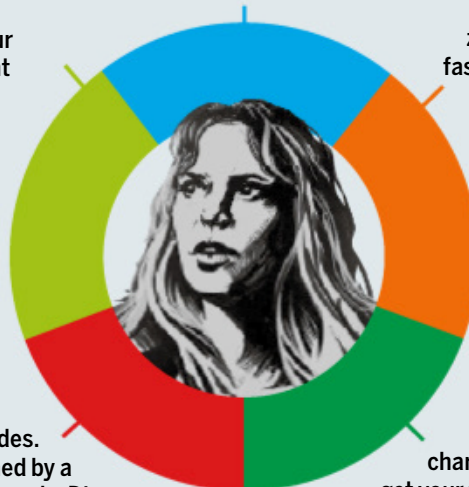
You found some awesome loot! But you're carrying so much the zombies walk faster than you. Oops.

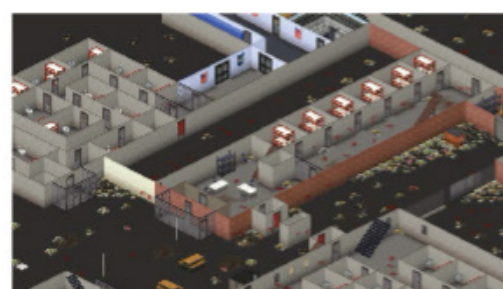
A TREE

Survive zombie hordes. Get scratched by a tree in the woods. Die after the scratch gets infected.

YOURSELF

You die and spawn a new character. Run to get your things. Killed by the zombie... of your last character.





ABOVE: No matter how well you plan, things get out of hand.

FAR LEFT: Get out of the city for a bit of relaxation.



Mods wonderfully expand the crafting system.



GET STARTED WITH MODS

Transform your favourite games, or just add Thomas the Tank Engine. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

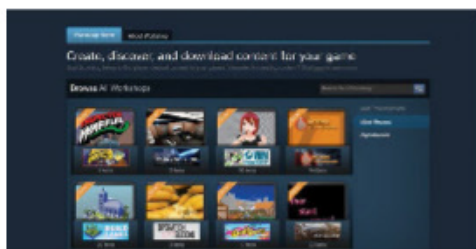
TIME
Five hours

VITAL LINKS

Full mods guide:
bit.ly/3sXjYQe

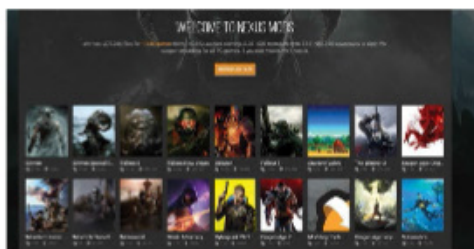
Steam Workshop:
bit.ly/3wOu6Nx

Nexus Mods:
bit.ly/3wKGEFH



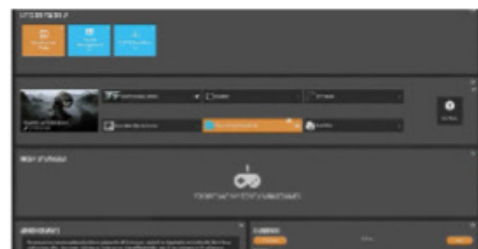
LIKE AND SUBSCRIBE

1 Steam Workshop is a great place to start. Installing a new mod is as simple as clicking 'Subscribe', or 'Unsubscribe' to remove it. Some supported games, like recent *Civilizations*, let you manage these mods in an in-game menu.



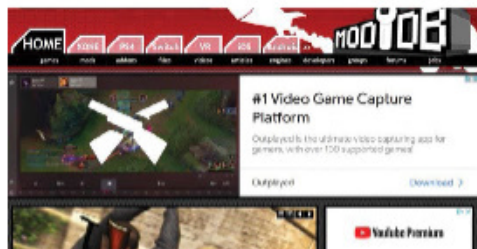
INTO THE NEXUS

2 The next step is Nexus Mods, which is the place to go for bigger, more complex mods for games like *The Witcher*, *Mass Effect*, and Bethesda's open world RPGs. You'll need to create an account, but your reward for signing up is near limitless possibilities.



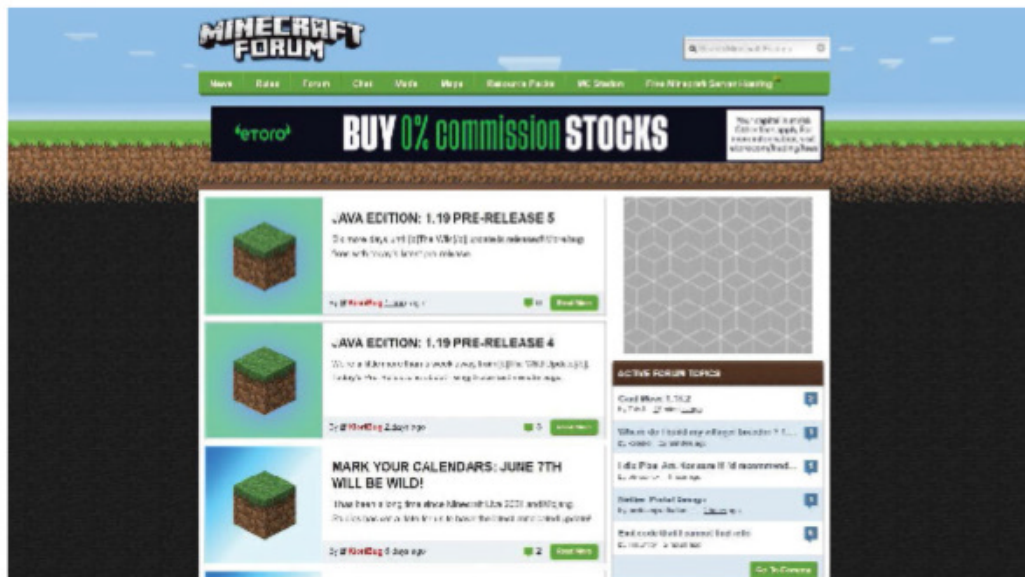
SPINNING AROUND

3 Making changes through Nexus Mods is even easier with its bespoke mod manager, Vortex. It simplifies mod installation, searches your PC for supported games, and helps you keep downloaded mods updated. If you're new to mods, Vortex is essential.



BASE OF OPERATIONS

4 Mod DB is the place to go for mods for older games, such as *Half-Life*, *Command & Conquer*, and *STALKER*. There are plenty of mods on here that are not on the major mod sources, but it also gives mod authors a voice with developer blogs and news.



MORE MODS

5 Those bigger mod sources not covering your chosen game? There are other, smaller, mod libraries specific to certain games. Don't forget about CurseForge for *Warcraft*, *Minecraftforum.net* for *Minecraft*, and *GTA5mods.com* for *GTA V*.



SAVE, NOT SORRY

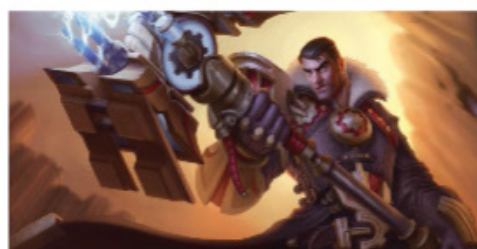
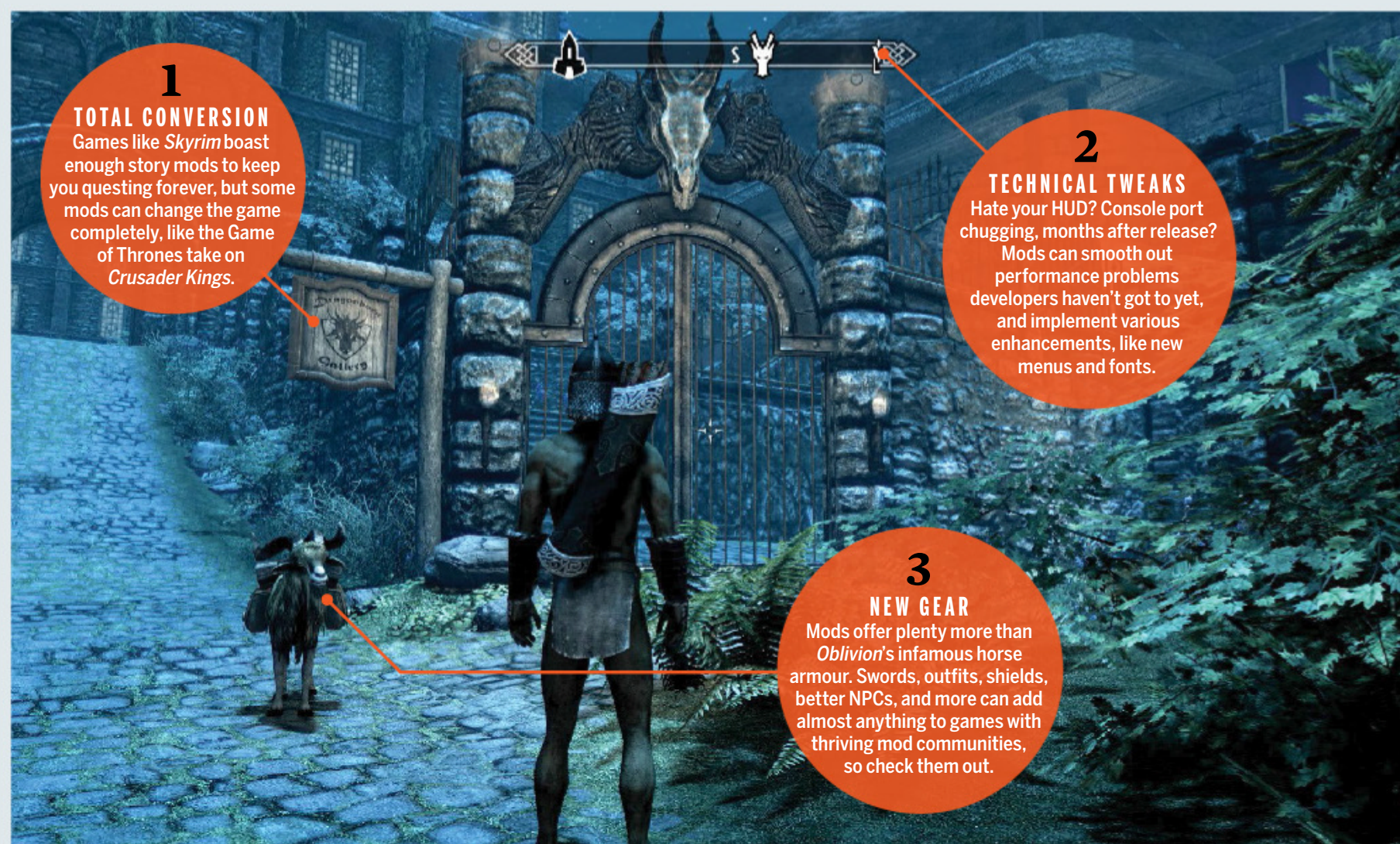
6 Always keep your modded saves backed up, and bear in mind that it could stop working at any time. Sometimes game updates can clash with existing mods, and it will take time for modders to make patches that set things right again.



START AGAIN

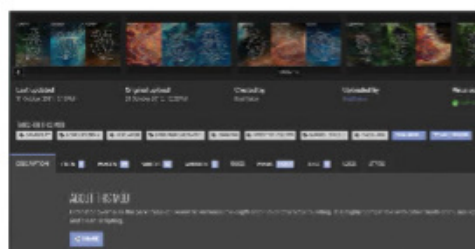
7 Even better, and especially for larger mods, it's often better to start an entirely fresh save. You're likely to have the best stability and performance this way, and it's also just a great way to really see the impact of big, game-changing mods.

NEXT LEVEL *The main mod types to get you started*



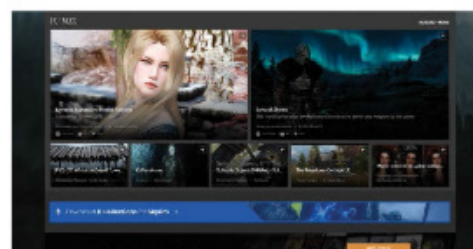
BAN HAMMER

8 While there are plenty of multiplayer games that do support mods, like *Team Fortress 2*, *Ark*, and *Rust*, generally be careful about installing mods to online games. You don't know how developers and publishers will react, and you might risk a ban.



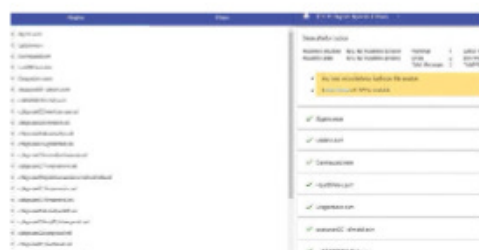
DUE DILIGENCE

9 Always read the mod author's install instructions. Always. A mod may conflict with existing ones you have, rely on you having certain ones already, or need to be loaded in a certain order. Read carefully to avoid frustration and the temptation to smash things up later.



FURTHER READING

10 Of course, there's more than just the initial author instructions. Keep track of their mod blogs, read reviews, and immerse yourself in forums. Fully take part in the culture of mods, and downloading them will just be the tip of the iceberg.



ORDER OF SERVICE

11 Often mods will need to be loaded in a certain order, also known as 'Load Order'. Software such as Vortex will do the bulk of this work for you, but it's important to be aware of it to avoid technical hiccups that will stop you from playing your newly modded game.



PICK AND MIX

12 Which mods should you even download? The PC Gamer website boasts an unrivalled list of the best mods around, for enhancing and reshaping everything from *Skyrim* and *The Witcher 3*, to *Valheim* and *No Man's Sky*.



SEARCHING FOR MUTANTS IN WILDERMYTH

Why is it so difficult to transform my heroes
into something weird? *By Rick Lane*



Last month, I tried to assemble the worst party imaginable in fable-spinning RPG *Wilderness*. This time around, I'm changing things. Literally. One of *Wilderness*'s most fun features is that characters do more than gain loot and experience on their adventures, they can undergo complete physical transformations. They can sprout wings, turn into trees, become engulfed by magical flames. These moments represent *Wilderness* at its most dramatic, and this month, I'm going to chase after them like a hobbit after their second breakfast.

That's not the only cool feature of *Wilderness* I'll be exploring, but more on that later. First, it's time to set the scene. We're embarking on *Wilderness*'s second campaign, The Enduring War, with three brand new wannabe heroes: a female warrior called Rothla Even, a male Hunter dubbed Talgarn Ollinknot, and a female Mystic, the pleasingly named Scraff Brightworth.

The story of the Enduring War revolves around the Morthagi, *Wilderness*'s race of steampunk cyborgs who look like they were built by Caractacus Potts from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang after he got really into necromancy. The Enduring War kicks off when one of these creatures dashes through our heroes' village, chased by a horde of slightly different-looking contraptions. Our heroes bravely defeat these skittering assemblages of cogs and bones, then abruptly decided to turn their ploughshares into swords, calling themselves 'The Hawks of Time', and setting off to look for a place called Softwurm Forge.

The first thing they actually do, however, is recruit a new member – Claynoc Bottlepurse. Yes, *Wilderness* lets you recruit characters from previous campaigns, de-aged and de-levelled to fit with your party, but with their personality traits and transformations intact. This means Claynoc joins the party with the magical stone in his eye from last month's diary. He also succinctly demonstrates what he brings to the party by immediately falling down a hole, forcing the others to go and fish him out.

Plenty happens in during the party's first year of adventuring. Rothla and Talgarn fall in love, while Scraff becomes besotted with a male water-nymph (he's very

charming, if a little wet behind the ears). Claynoc and Rothla find a mysterious box that contains a strange, seemingly useless coin. And the whole party embarks on a very noble quest to steal an eagle's egg from its nest (they fail). Their first adventure culminates in their arrival at Softwurm Forge, where they help an ageing blacksmith named Alecsho fend off a Morgathi assault.

SPARE CHANGE?

What doesn't happen, though, is a lot of transformation. In *Wilderness*, transformations happen during special world events called 'themes'. World events happen every

WILDERMYTH LETS YOU RECRUIT CHARACTERS FROM PREVIOUS CAMPAIGNS

time characters clear an area tile of enemies (and in a few other circumstances), but whether or not these become 'theme' event is largely down to luck. For some reason, my story dice keep coming up snake-eyes. The only party member to get a transformation is Claynoc, whose stony affliction spreads to his arm, turning it into a crystal blade.

On the plus side, it's early days. Surely *Wilderness* can't withhold the good stuff for five chapters, right?

A decade passes, Rothla and Talgarn get married. Scraff pops off with her pre-lubricated boyfriend. Claynoc gets used to life with a knife-arm. And a new adventurer joins the party, a female warrior named Dru. But they're eventually re-called to action after Alecsho warns them of another Morgathi incursion.

The Hawks' second outing starts more promisingly. While sheltering from a storm inside an old shack, Talgarn encounters a mysterious woman dressed like a raven. She puts him into a trance, and when he awakes, he has the wings of a crow. Oh yeah baby! We've got our first proper transformation, and it's not even spring.

This is promptly followed by the weirdest quest I've ever seen in *Wilderness*. Troubled by a mysterious affliction, Scraff embarks on a journey inside herself,

somehow taking Rothla with her. I'd like to believe this is metaphorical, as I don't particularly want to think about the mechanics of it otherwise. Mercifully, any metaphysical questions are briskly swept aside by the appearance of a talking pig.

"Pig of my insides, tell me why I've felt so sick since the winter," Scraff says, as if it's an entirely normal statement. The pig reveals that Scraff is infested with a host of parasitic organisms, and she needs to quite literally fight the infestation. Instead, Scraff decides to try talking to the monsters, and manages to come to an accord with the parasites. Incensed, the pig turns into a giant, fiery demon, who Scraff and Rothla fight to the death. Scraff then cooks her new lodgers a tasty dinner of crawdads.

THE RULES

1. Characters must always transform when given the chance.

2. Must make a genuine effort to complete quests.

3. Legacy characters play by the rules of the first diary.





>> I can only assume the writers came up with this story after suffering some shellfish-based food poisoning. Anyway, despite becoming a living lobster-tank, somehow Scraff's benign disease doesn't count as a transformation, which is a shame as turning into a giant prawn seems quintessentially *Wildermyth*.

GRIEF ENCOUNTERS

The rest of the chapter is a bust, too. Claynoc and Rothla help an old friend come to terms with the death of her husband, by which I mean they help her teleport to a shadow realm where life and death have no meaning and they can live together in eternity (I hope she took a pack of cards or something). Meanwhile, the most exciting thing to happen to Talgaron after his transformation is that he gets his foot caught on a vine.

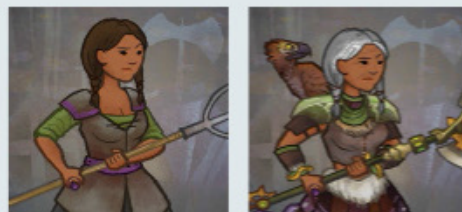
After seeing off the Morgarathi incursion, the Hawks of Time enjoy another ten years of peace. Claynoc and Talgaron's transformations advance, while Talgaron and Rothla's daughter, Coury, joins the party as a warrior. Their third outing kicks off when the blacksmith Aleccsho disappears with the mysterious Morthagi seen running through the village at the very start of the Hawks of Time's adventure (whose name is Lucky, it turns out). Together, they set off into the wilderness once more, in search of their missing friend. Shortly afterward, Rothla gets turned into a duck.

QUACKERS

It happens when the Hawks of Time stumble upon a glittering pool in a subterranean cavern. Enticed by the cool waters, Rothla takes a dip. But the moment she slips beneath the surface, she immediately transforms into the

A CHANGE OF FACE

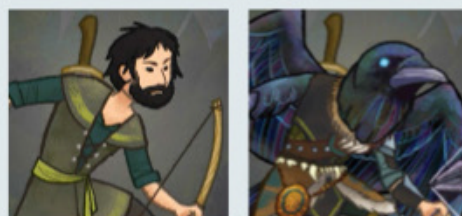
Even without many transformations, the adventures took their toll



ROTHLA



SCRAFF



TELAGRON

world's most common waterfowl. She also attracts the attention of another duck, which immediately forms a duck-crush on her. This might seem cute, but it's worth remembering real-life duck mating is phenomenally unpleasant, to the point where male ducks have evolved to have a spring-loaded penis (look it up).

Thankfully, this is an idealised, Disney-style duck-romance with no exploding genitalia involved whatsoever. It's also very brief, as Rothla returns to human form the moment she steps out of the pond. I'm beginning to feel like *Wildermyth* is actively teasing me now, dangling potential transformations in front of me like some weird mutant carrot, specifically one that turns into a Mars Bar until I come within biting distance of it. At least Rothla gets to keep her duck suitor as a pet, with it waddling around her ankles for the rest of her fighting career.

Following Rothla's duck courtship, the Hawks successfully defend a village from Morgarathi attack, while Talgaron discovers that he can talk to crows, convincing one to give him a 'lucky' coin from its nest. Beyond that, nothing of major significance happens during this

chapter. In fact, the interceding years of peace are arguably more interesting. Talgaron's transformation extends to his head, meaning he's a diet of sheep's eyeballs away from going Full Crow. Meanwhile, Claynoc's remaining arm turns into a big rock shield, meaning he can no longer wield his bow. So Claynoc becomes a frontline soldier, while the Hawks recruit a new archer to fill the ranks, a plucky young fellow called Ranbeld.

The penultimate act begins with the Hawks searching for the machines that create the Morgarathi, in order to

destroy them. But a lot of the action in this chapter centres around money. Talgaron loses the lucky coin given to him by the crow in the previous chapter, and searching for it leads him to acquire a new pet, a strange but passably cute creature that looks a bit like an owl crossed with a koala.

Rothla finally finds a use for the coin she picked up way back in the first chapter, after she bumps into a merchant selling tails. That's right, tails, as in the rear appendage animals have and humans don't. Fearing the merchant might be telling tales as well as selling them, Rothla probes his story deeper, whereupon he reveals he's been forced into this job due to a debt with creatures that sound a lot like demons, and he can only repay it using very specific coins, like the one Rothla has.

BELOW: During fights Rothla's speciality is 'kicking ass'.





I'M NOT SACRIFICING ONE OF MY VETERANS AT THIS STAGE IN THE GAME

Rothla reckons it all sounds a bit dodgy. But on the other hand, it's been bloody ages since we had anything resembling a transformation, and that scorpion tail would come in handy in battle. So she coughs up the otherwise useless coin, and walks away with a brand new limb that lets her poison enemies with its deadly sting. Let's just hope she doesn't sleep on her back.

Shortly after this, the Hawks make their approach on the Morgathi stronghold. Here, they're finally re-joined by Aleccsho, who, with the aid of that other mysterious Morgathi, has turned himself into one in an attempt to prolong his life. He might look like something that'd jump out at you in a carnival ghost train, but he's still on the side of the Hawks of Time.

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

They descend into the stronghold, which is overrun with Morgathi. Even with a large group of veteran warriors, the fight through the stronghold is a tough one, and they barricade themselves inside a room with a strange machine. This machine, Aleccsho explains, will let them recruit some of the Morgathi to their side. But operating it requires assimilating with it, and it's a one way trip.

The party gathers, and decides what to do. Should Claynoc go? Talgarron? Scraff? No, in the end, it's Coury, Rothla and Talgarron's daughter, who steps forward. I'd like to say this is for some noble reason, or at least

dramatic effect. But to be honest, Coury hasn't really done anything in this entire campaign, and I'm not sacrificing one of my veterans at this stage in the game. Off you go, Coury. We'll probably remember you.

Coury's assimilation with the machine proves crucial, giving the Hawks just enough of an edge to emerge victorious in the ensuing fight. But there is a cost. The loss of Coury is too much for Rothla, and once the fight is done, she puts down her axe for good. And she only just got her scorpion tail. In typical fashion, *Wildermyth* has denied me another potential transformation. Dru also hangs up her spear at the end of this chapter. Remember Dru? She was also involved!

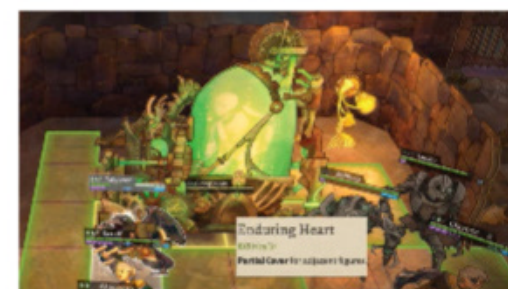
The final chapter is pretty much a straight run to destroy the Morgathi core and end the Enduring war, although it's less of a run and more of a stiff hobble, as Claynoc, Talgarron, and Scraff are all in their 70s by this point.

Nonetheless, reinforced by Ranbeld and a brief return by Frelwane, another legacy hero from last month, they track down the hub of the Morgathi hivemind and turn it into so much scrap.

It's a victory, but it feels a little hollow. My plan for this diary was to show you the fullest extent of *Wildermyth's* transformations. Instead, all I've got to show for it is Big Bird and Rock Boy. That's the perils of adventuring I suppose. You can only have your epic battle if the other side shows up. Otherwise, all you've got is a really big meeting. ■

ABOVE: Talgarron enjoying a bird's eye view of the action.

BELOW: "How's your daughter." "Oh she's great. Lights up a room, you might say."



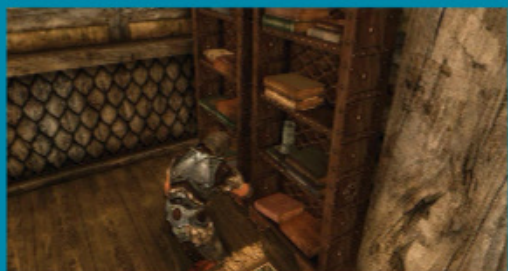


WHY I LOVE

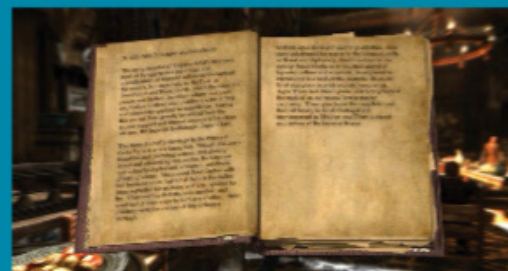
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

READING BOOKS IN RPGs

I can't slay a dragon, I've got a library to read. *By Fraser Brown*



LEFT: Don't mind me, I'm just reciting a poem to a stranger.



I've always been convinced that the best part of game development must be getting to write RPG flavour text. It's where RPG scribes can get weird or scratch a particular writing itch without the pressure that comes from fitting it into the main story, even if most of it ends up just falling into the nebulous category of 'lore'.

Whatever it is, I lap it up. There's just something extremely decadent about this kind of flavour text. It's all so unnecessary, but developers like Bethesda and Obsidian still dedicate what must be a not-insignificant amount of time and resources into what, let's face it, a substantial number of players aren't going to bother reading. It's a little treat. Like I'm having a wee nibble on some sweets I have secreted away between courses at a fancy restaurant.

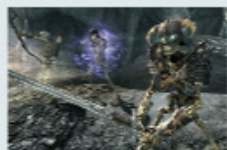
And I know, when I'm snacking on this, that I'm lucky, because a lot of developers don't have the luxury to litter their worlds with so much ancillary stuff. Even the ones that are dense with lore don't typically turn that lore into a library's worth of books spanning nearly every genre imaginable. But for those that do, I'm eternally grateful.

HOMework

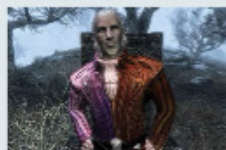
Even when they end up being stuffy historical accounts, I appreciate the hint of that larger world that they provide. Sure, a lot of that stuff ends up being boilerplate fantasy nonsense with a bunch of unfamiliar names and a list of rote deeds, but even the less-than-evocative ones can contain a nugget of information that gives us a slightly better understanding of the digital universe we find ourselves temporarily inhabiting.

An author you've never heard of recounting a fictional battle that happened hundreds of years ago is

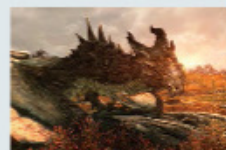
TAMRIEL BESTSELLERS *Find your new favourite book*



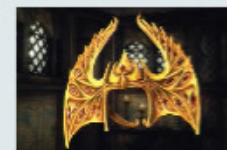
PALLA
This two-volume parable follows a man in love with a dead woman who he's only seen in a statue. Knowing only her name, or so he thinks, he attempts to bring her back to life. Bad idea.



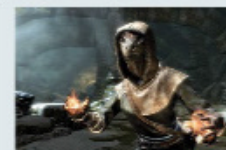
WABBAJACK
Sheogorath always brings the goods. The loopy Daedric Prince of Madness has the best toys, and this brisk yarn is about one of them, and a boy who's driven mad by it. Weird, creepy and pretty funny.



KOLB AND THE DRAGON
A quick Choose Your Own Adventure-style yarn, Kolb and the Dragon tasks you with hunting down and defeating a dragon. It's like having a wee RPG inside a massive one.



THE REAL BARENZIAH
Barenziah is the inspiration for this five-volume historical epic that's been around since Daggerfall. She leads quite the life, which should impress even the Dragonborn.



THE LUSTY ARGONIAN MAID
This is one everyone remembers: a smutty play. It's good fun, full of painful double-entendres, though sadly the two volumes only contain parts of the fourth and seventh acts.

probably not going to have much bearing on the quest you're on, but it might explain old grudges still present today, or offer some insights into cultures involved in the fight, which in turn could inform you about what they're like now. Or it might just be a rollicking yarn that offers a diversion between quests.

Now, if you just learn that Barry the Orc fought Leonard the Elf in the fields of Gloomheim in the year 678,

I APPRECIATE THE HINT OF THAT LARGER WORLD THAT THEY PROVIDE

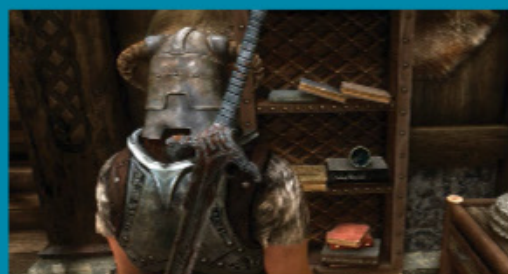
that's not going to mean anything, and that kind of worldbuilding we could probably do with a lot less of – but books inspire a little bit more effort. You've got to make that lore fit the structure of a novel or a collection of songs. Books demand more consideration. But they also provide more sources of inspiration. With all these different genres and formats to play with, suddenly a dry story about a famous sword could become a romantic epic or a tragedy that plays out across the stanzas of a poem.

BOOKWYRM

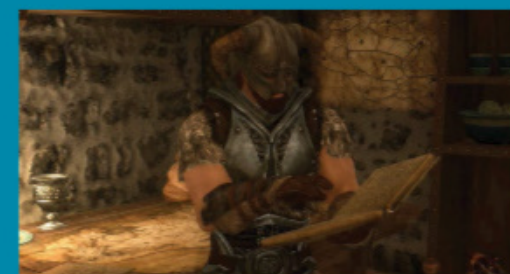
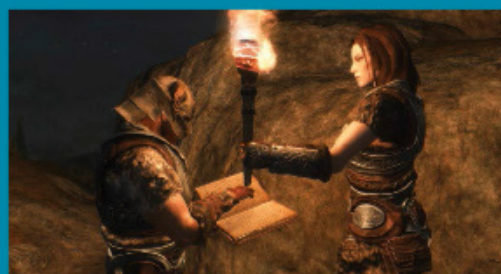
The Elder Scrolls stands out as the best example of this, even using skill book to tell short stories. The volume is impressive, but games like *Skyrim* also benefit from the series' legacy. There are books that crop up in multiple iterations, and while probably the biggest reason for this is that it's efficient and reduces the amount of time and money that would need to be invested in the development of all this flavour text, the result is a world that feels so much more tangible and permanent.

Recycling books this way also makes me feel less guilty about enjoying this treat, because while I'm nibbling away I do get a bit worried that what I'm reading is the product of crunch or tyrannical management.

Anyway! I'm playing *Skyrim* once again, with a new modlist (which contains some nice 4K book covers) so I should probably get back to reading. My inventory is laden with stories. There are no e-readers in Tamriel, so I carry my library on my back. It's probably time to buy a house, but they're pricey, and surprisingly enough feverishly collecting every book you can get your hands on does not give you many opportunities to get rich. ■



RIGHT: True friends always help their mates read in the dark.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Stick 'em up.



METAL GEAR SOLID V

Does my favourite game of 2015 still hold up? *By Morgan Park*

I don't think I've ever been more excited for a videogame than the years I spent waiting for *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. Once it was finally out in 2015, the game shattered my expectations with its sandboxy stealth, rich toolset, wacky cast of characters, and reactive AI. It's easily my favourite game in years, but after I'd sapped nearly 100 hours out of it, I never went back.

Seven years is a scary amount of time to be away from what I've considered the greatest stealth game of all time. I almost didn't want to find out if I've been blowing smoke all this time. It's time to face the 2022 truth: it isn't quite the masterpiece I remember anymore, but it is still the gold standard for stealth game hijinks.

I hoped I'd fall right back into my old rhythm of sneaking into compounds and kidnapping skilled Russians by the dozens. Turns out it had been just long enough that I'd forgotten just how long *MGSV* takes to get to the fun part.

Remember the whole bit with the hospital attack at the start? Holy hell, what an awful way to start a game. In my head that whole sequence is about 15 minutes, but in reality it's more like 45 minutes of mostly crawling on the floor and following a straight line down hallways while getting interrupted by cutscenes ever other minute. It's a potent dose of Kojima bullshit to get hit with right off the bat, and pretty much the opposite of what makes the rest of *MGSV* fun.

But eventually I was let loose on the deserts of Afghanistan once more and got to the good stuff. I love

that one of the first things the game teaches you is that there's an entire button on the controller devoted to hanging off the side of D-Horse to enter 'horse stealth' mode. Does it look goofy? Absolutely, but it's a totally practical mechanic that's super handy for passing by guard posts without raising a fuss.

Horse stealth also establishes a mantra that *MGSV* will repeat over and over – every tool has multiple uses, including ones it won't tell you about. This is one piece of magic that I'm sad I'll never get to experience again. I can't un-learn that Snake's water pistol can short-circuit generators without raising alarm, or unsee the time D-Horse did a number two on the road and an approaching Jeep spun out in the massive turd like a slippery banana peel.

GOON PATROL

Some of *MGSV*'s charms will never wear off, though, like its NPCs that

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 1, 2015

DEVELOPER
Kojima Productions

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
konami.com/mg/mgsv



» still feel distinctly more ‘alive’ than your standard stealth action goon. Enemy AI is the soul of a good stealth game and *MGSV*’s still the most reactive around.

Instead of being stuck in either calm or alert mode, soldiers can enter varying degrees of ‘sus’ depending how long they caught a glimpse of Snake. If it was just a quick glance, they’ll probably stare in your direction for a bit then go back to their business. If they’re sure they saw something move, they’ll

investigate your location and report what they saw.

The only game that comes close to this level of stealth AI these days is the new *Hitman* trilogy, and even that game doesn’t pull it off quite as organically. And that’s just the start of *MGSV*’s AI interactions. Place a poster of a Russian soldier on a cardboard box while standing and faraway guards will think you’re one of them. With the right cassette tape, I can even hide in a toilet and convince a suspicious guard to leave

ABOVE: Guards can spot Snake from pretty far away, so stay low.

me alone on account of horrible explosive diarrhoea.

Nab a soldier into a chokehold and I can make him give up the locations of his buddies. Approach with a gun drawn and Snake will initiate a stickup, at which point I can tell the obedient soldier to shut up and lie down. Why can’t I do this in any other stealth action games? It’s so cool! Try to hold a *Hitman* guard at gunpoint and they’ll throw caution to the wind to try to out-gun you.

Admittedly, a lot of these interactions are obscure and not exactly practical. Instead of going through the trouble of playing a poop tape, it’s a lot easier to simply knock out a suspicious guard with a tranq dart and Fulton him back off to Mother Base. But like any good immersive sim, the fun is in having options! The more ways I have to express Snake’s coolness, the more convincing the fantasy.

TECH TREE

Having the foreknowledge of how many cool gadgets Snake unlocks made it all the harder to start over from scratch and wait for them. For the first dozen hours, Snake’s most sophisticated piece of tech is a cardboard box.

THINK SNEAK

The mental gymnastics of being Big

40%

ANXIETY

Did that guard just see me? I think he saw me. He looks a little suspicious.

25%

BRAINSTORMING

I bet I could knock that guy off the cliff if I trigger an inflatable decoy next to him.



20%

RECRUITMENT

I can’t shoot this guy! He has an S+ rating in R&D and I could use his skills.

10%

GROOVING

I can hear Rebel Yell playing inside that tent. I really want that tape.

5%

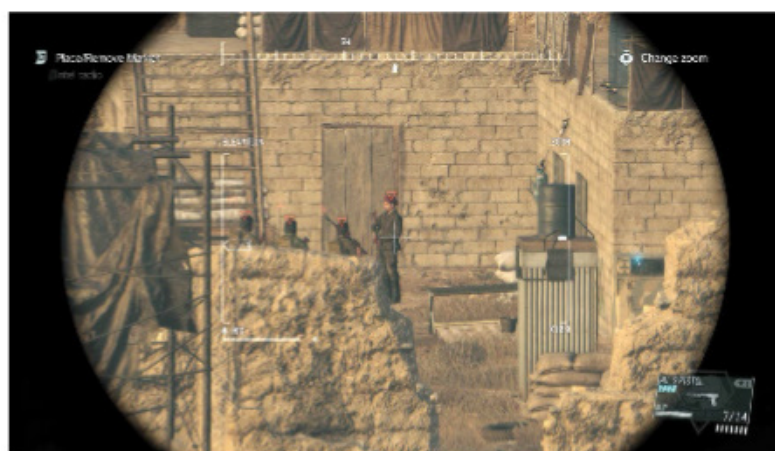
PETS

Oh, D-Dog. Such a good, loyal, obedient murder dog.



TOP: If push comes to shove, take a human meatshield.

RIGHT: Enemies have unique patrol routes that can be exploited if quick.



MGSV is secretly about two bros rekindling their love.

I had completely forgotten what it was like to deploy on missions without Quiet's sniper support. Even my best boy D-Dog was a pain to unlock. First you have to randomly find him in the open world as an adorable little wolf pup, then you have to take him to Mother Base to train with Ocelot for an indeterminate amount of time until he grows into a silent killer.

One of my favourite weapons in the game, the Rocket Punch arm attachment, unlocked so late in the game that I was almost done playing. Even that silly water pistol I mentioned can't be crafted until well over halfway through the main story. Having also replayed *Death Stranding* recently and finally unlocking the floating carrier after 20 hours, I'm noticing a pattern of Hideo Kojima games taking way too long to get to the good parts.

Thankfully, that's where mods can come in clutch. My first *MGSV* playthrough was on PlayStation 4, so I was completely unaware of how many handy mods people have made over the years. Most of the mods on offer add new outfits for make slight alterations, but some of the most downloaded mods are simple cheats like infinite ammo, suppressors that

WHAT MODS CAN'T FIX IS MGSV'S REMARKABLY DRAB OPEN WORLD HUBS

never break, and so on. And yes, you can even unlock every item in the game immediately.

UGLY TRUTH

What mods can't fix, unfortunately, is *MGSV*'s remarkably drab open world hubs. The valleys and rolling hills of Afghanistan and Africa are much smaller than I remember. Treks between compounds via horseback or Jeep are often just about a minute or two away, not even enough time to sing along to A-ha's Take on Me on Snake's Walkman.

The maps' meagre sizes aren't due to an abundance of graphical detail, either. Basic ground textures look fine from a distance, but fix your view on the ground and its blurriness becomes unmissable. It wouldn't be so bad if you never had to get close to the ground, but I spent half of *MGSV* in a full crawl. A lot of *MGSV* still looks pretty nice – Kojima's attention to detail in characters and equipment models hold up, but everything



organic in *The Phantom Pain* looks unmistakably last-last-gen.

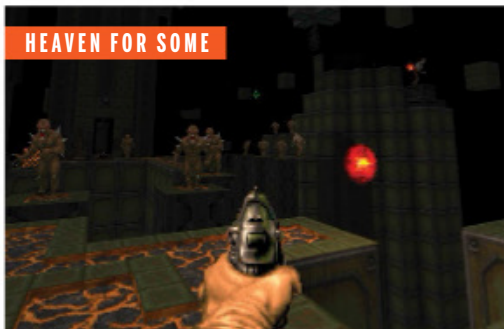
That's not too far from the truth, either. *MGSV* looked a bit dated even when it came out, especially compared against the other open-world darling of 2015, *The Witcher 3*. The disparity can probably be attributed to the fact that *MGSV* also released on PS3 and Xbox 360. That was a huge game to cram into a box manufactured in 2005. The multiplatform release made a lot of sense at the time, but lowering its graphical ceiling has done it no favours in the years since.

That said, *MGSV* is an old game now, and I don't dive back into old games looking to be graphically wowed. Seven years later, few have even tried to create a stealth sandbox with a similar scope. Kojima Productions did outdo itself in some ways with the abundant goofy gadgets of *Death Stranding*, but if you're looking for a stealth action that carries the torch for the abandoned *Metal Gear* series, the closest replacement out there is *Sniper Elite 5*. You should try that game out, and then maybe come back to *The Phantom Pain*. Just make sure to pick up a mod that skips the really awful opening hour. ■

DOMINIC
TARASON

Jack-of-all-trades, master of obscure games. The product of a wasted youth, now taking great pleasure in helping people find the hidden gem they never knew they needed.

HEAVEN FOR SOME



DOOM II: HELL ON EARTH

slayersclub.bethesda.net

→ In 1994, Doom II cemented the shape of FPSes to come. In 2022, the DOOM2.WAD file is a key to a million user-made maps, mods, and whole new games. It was the seed the 'boomer shooter' craze grew from, and hasn't left my hard drive in nearly 30 years.

PLATINUM'S TROJAN HORSE



THE WONDERFUL 101: REMASTERED

platinumgames.com

→ Don't let the cute aesthetics fool you; this is Platinum's most hardcore and demanding action game by far. A gigantic story mode that's almost all set-pieces, and a deep complex combat engine. There's a tough learning curve, but master it and you'll feel like a superhero.

NIGHTMARE HIKING SIM

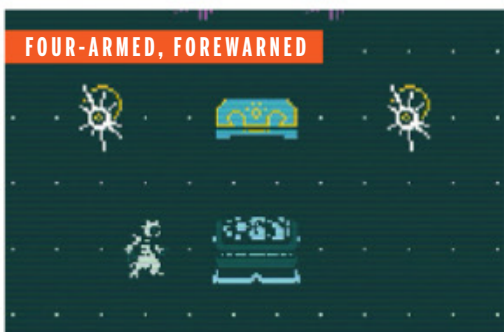


INTO THE RADIUS VR

cm.games

→ Both scenic and stress-inducing, *Into The Radius VR* is basically *STALKER* for the fancy techno-goggle crowd. Scavenging haunted wastelands and stuffing your backpack full of loot is compelling, and relaxing up until the crack of a bullet sends you diving to the ground.

FOUR-ARMED, FOREWARNED



CAVES OF QUD

cavesofqud.com

→ Part roguelike, part story-driven sandbox RPG. *Caves Of Qud* doesn't look like much, but give it a chance and you'll get lost in its beautifully written pulp sci-fi world. Be a rapidly mutating psychic limb-tree, befriend a clan of science-bears, and fear the chrome pyramids.

MUST
PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Dominic Tarason

LASER MIXOLOGY ACTION



COPY KITTY

entanma.itch.io/copy-kitty

→ An offbeat platform shooter that resonates at the exact frequency of my soul. Aspiring superheroine Boki has the power to absorb up to three abilities copied from enemies and combine them into a single hybrid super-attack. Mix up hundreds of weapons to test in hundreds of levels.

CARDS AGAINST HUMANITY



LIBRARY OF RUINA

twitter.com/ProjMoonStudio

→ A complex card-battler with a thing for multi-phase boss fights, paired with a truly grim urban fantasy story. Invite guests to your cursed library; if they defeat your librarians, they get the knowledge they seek. If they die, they become books. You are not the hero in this tale.

"I'M IN"

NITE TEAM 4 -
MILITARY HACKING DIVISION

aliceetsmith.com

→ A good hacking game needs to make you feel both proficient and cool. *NITE Team 4* manages both and more, mixing real-life infosec practices and a cyber-espionage story. Expect to do real-world research to solve its puzzles.

TRANSCENDENTAL SHMUPPING



ZERORANGER

se-made.com

→ *ZeroRanger* might limit itself to a mere eight-colour palette, but holds nothing else back. Great music, huge bosses, and even some plot. Shmups are not normally known for their storytelling, but *ZeroRanger* manages to weave in plenty of twists and surprises without losing pace.



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MISSING IN ACTION

We've seen plenty of announcements and reveals at this summer's events – but there were a few notable **NO-SHOWS...**



DUKE NUKEM FOREVER 2

We're 11 years on from *Duke Nukem Forever's* launch now – surely that's the perfect time to announce a sequel, for release in 2042?



CALL OF DUTY VS RABBIDS

Rumour is this long-anticipated crossover has been put on hold because its plot contains "accidental yet disturbing parallels" to recent global catastrophes.



THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

What, you were too busy this year to give us another version of *Skyrim*, Todd? What are we supposed to do, play a different videogame?



PC GAMER: THE GAME

Listen, we're working as fast as we can, but it turns out making a videogame is harder than we expected. Maybe we should score reviews more generously?

...UNTIL **AUG 18**

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